

Slytherin Rising Part One: Sleeping Death

by J. L. Matthews

Chapter One A Mysterious Letter

July, 1989. Somewhere in suburban Surrey.

The summer holidays were always a drag, but this year they seemed worse than usual, Luella Martin thought to herself. Not even her best friend Deanna Tyler's lively suggestions on what they could both get up to could cheer her up.

"Come on, Lu, we've got to do something! I'm bored, you're bored, so let's go and amuse ourselves. I'll bring some tapes, you get your tape player, we'll spend the afternoon by the river and chill."

"We always do that. All summer. Every summer. I'm not in the mood," Luella said, depressed.

Deanna stopped pacing around and looked at her friend, who was sat on her bed looking fed up. Luella's normally round, cheerful face, framed by dark brown hair and dominated by clear blue eyes, looked dull and apathetic.

"Spit it out, Lu. What's bothering you? As if I can't guess."

Luella looked her in the eye. "Nothing's bothering me. I'm fine." She gestured dramatically. "After all, I've only got my best friend in all the world, my best mate since childhood, heading off to some expensive boarding school in September to make lots of new friends and forget all about me." She got up. "What do I care if I have to stay behind at some poxy grammar school, which is miles from my house and where I know absolutely no one? How am I going to deal with all that, going to a new school, making new friends, without my best friend with me?" Luella turned away, her face buried in her hands.

Deanna walked over to her and slipped her arms around her. She hadn't expected Luella to take it this badly. Yet on reflection, what had she expected? Luella and Deanna had known each other for years. They lived in the same street and had grown up together. Deanna's mother, bringing up her daughter on her own, had been glad of the support the Martins had offered when she moved in, and the two girls had spent a lot of time together as a result. It could have easily ended up with the two of them hating each other, but for some reason, they hit it off immediately. They discovered they had similar personalities, a shared delight for mischief, and perhaps most significantly, neither of them were like anyone else they knew. For example, things just seemed to happen around them both. Things flew off shelves or fell off walls from time to time. Or disappeared entirely. Then there was that time when both of them managed to get themselves trapped in a locked cupboard at school, without opening the door first. Their teachers were regularly furious with them, and Mr. and Mrs. Martin were always wondering why their daughter couldn't be normal like everyone else. Mrs. Tyler, on the other hand, seemed to tolerate her child's antics with an attitude of amusement. But then, she wasn't exactly normal herself. An eccentric

young Welsh widow with a mysterious job in London that occasionally required her to disappear at short notice for days at a time leaving Deanna with the Martins, her house was a regular treasure trove of candles, incense, the family owl Grendel, crystals, weird objects with no apparent purpose, normal objects which did anything but normal things and books with titles like *Dancing the Dark: My Life as an Aurora* by Penelope Moonfalcon, *Dark Wizards and Witches of the 20th Century* by Burke and O'Reilly (19th ed.), and *Counter Curses for all Occasions* by Ninianne Paracelsus. The "village witch", she was called behind her back, and Luella at least had often wondered whether it might not be true. Deanna, however, accepted all this as normal. It was the rest of the world she'd always thought was strange. Whereas Luella had only been able to wonder if she really belonged here, Deanna had always known she hadn't. And this was the source of their current disagreement.

Deanna had been down for her mother's old school since she was a child. Luella, needless to say, was attending the local high school. This might not have been an insurmountable problem for two normal girls, but Luella and Deanna were not normal. The other schoolchildren had always picked on them and tormented them, or at best, ignored them. All they'd really had was each other. And now...

"Now I won't even have that!" Luella was sobbing. "I never minded being the odd kid no one liked, because at least the two of us were odd kids together. Now what do I do?"

Deanna looked on, helpless to do anything but dry her friend's eyes. "Lu, I'm sorry! I really am. I'd like nothing better than for you to come to Hogwarts too. I really think you'd like it there. But if you're not down for it, they won't take you. I'm really sorry."

"Not sorry enough to tell your mum you're not going," Luella observed tartly.

Deanna wrung her hands guiltily. "Lu, I'm sorry, but... that's not an option. If only I could explain..." She leant back, sighing. "If only I could explain what Hogwarts means to me! Ever since I was little, Mum has told me about Hogwarts, and what it's like. It's been my hope, my dream to go there. A whole school, full of people like, well..." She looked apologetic. "People like me, basically. And Mum. Having to live in a narrow-minded little town like this, put up with those idiots at school, and adults who just don't understand..." She looked at Luella, desperately pleading with her to understand. "It's all that's kept me going at times, knowing that this place is not my real home, not my real community. That when I was eleven years old, I'd go off to Hogwarts, and get a proper education with my real people. That is what has really kept me sane, that I can escape! Lu, I care about you deeply, and I really value your friendship, but I cannot give up my dream! Not for anything!" She took a deep breath and carried on, "Not even you. I'm sorry, but there it is. I hope you understand."

Luella had stopped crying, but her mood hadn't improved. Now she just looked bitter.

"Oh, I understand all right. You care more about your precious Hogwarts Academy than your best friend!" she snapped. "Well, if that's how you feel, then fine! But don't expect me to be your friend still and hang around with you, and act like everything is lovely. Because it isn't, and I just don't want to see you anymore! Now get out!"

Deanna got up. She opened her mouth as if to say something, but closed it again. There didn't seem to be any point arguing. If Luella wanted to be stupid about this, then let her. It wasn't like she wouldn't meet new people at Hogwarts after all. Deanna turned and left. The door was slammed shut behind her. A lump in her throat and a prickling sensation in her eyes, Deanna walked home.

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A few days passed. In their separate homes, Luella spent as much time as possible shut in her room, listlessly going along with her parents' plans for the new school year, while Deanna... actually, Deanna was doing much the same thing, if she had but known it.

Deanna's mother, a slenderly built honey-blonde witch with mischievous brown eyes and a charming smile that concealed most effectively the steely core within, was planning her only child's forthcoming departure with an efficiency bordering on military. Although given that she did actually work for the nearest thing the magical world had to an army, that wasn't entirely unexpected.

"Let me see," Caitlin Tyler murmured, idly tracing the school list in front of her with the end of a rather expensive looking quill pen. "Cauldron, scales set, robes, three sets thereof, telescope, about five textbooks, and of course, a wand. Hecate, this is going to be expensive. What do they think we are, made of money?"

"We are, aren't we?" asked Deanna, her mind elsewhere as she stared out of the window at the Martin's house.

"Well, yes, but that's not the point," said Caitlin. "What about those without much money? The Weasleys for example: Arthur and Molly have got two starting this year, how are they going to manage?"

"Who cares?" shrugged Deanna. "They're not us."

"Deanna!" her mother warned her. "Don't be so selfish."

"I'm not being selfish," Deanna replied. "I just don't know them as well as you, that's all."

"I don't know them that well," Caitlin admitted. "I just see Arthur at work sometimes. But that's hardly the point. You should be nice to those less fortunate."

"Mother, if you really wanted to be nice to them, you'd offer to buy their kids' Hogwarts stuff," Deanna pointed out, not entirely unreasonably.

"They'd never accept it," Caitlin said, returning her attention to the school list.

"Their problem then, isn't it?" Deanna replied, indicating that that was the end of it. Caitlin had to admit that there was a certain logic to that. However, she didn't think it would be a good idea to let her daughter know that. Changing the subject, she asked,

"So how's Luella then? Coping well with everything? All the upheaval of a new school, must be difficult for her. Wonder how her family are taking it."

"Absolutely fine," Deanna replied, stony-faced. "Making plans and buying her uniform right now. That tutor her parents hired got her through the eleven-plus, so off to Tiffin Girls School she goes."

"Tiffin?" Caitlin laid down her quill, a rather perplexed look on her face. "She never mentioned anything about going away to boarding school at all?"

Deanna shook her head. "No. Should she have done?"

Caitlin leaned back in her velveteen dark green armchair, frowning. "That's odd. She should have heard by now..." She sat upright, fixing Deanna with a stare that suddenly filled the girl with an irresistible urge to start fidgeting. "Are you sure she's had no offers from any other school?"

"I think Kingston Grammar were interested too, why?" Deanna asked, her curiosity piqued. Sitting upright, as opposed to lounging vertically on the sofa, she returned her mother's gaze without so much as a blink. "Mum, what's going on, do you know something I don't?"

"Not know exactly," Caitlin said, deep in thought. "Just something I suspected. Maybe I was wrong. I mean, I suppose I could be wrong, but... I'll have to see if I can't check a few records at the Ministry, or maybe hit up Albus for some information, but I always thought..." Her voice trailed off.

"Ministry records??" Deanna asked, now totally confused. "Why would Lu and her family have Ministry records, they're Muggles!" Her eyes narrowed in suspicion. "They are Muggles, aren't they?"

"Her parents are, certainly," Caitlin replied. "But about Luella, I am not so sure."

Deanna found herself lost for words as one of the pillars of her reality began to tremble. "But Mum, she can't be, she's just a Muggle kid, where would she have inherited her powers from?"

"I couldn't even begin to tell you," Caitlin said distantly. "But this I do know, magic can appear spontaneously in any Muggle family. You don't need to be pure- or even half-blood to do magic."

And with those words, one of Deanna's main beliefs finally dissolve and came crashing to the ground. *Some Muggle kids can do magic. We're not a breed apart.* Swiftly followed by *if some Muggles can do magic too, then why not Lu?*

"You think she's one of us." Deanna shot to her feet. "You think she's one of us, don't you!" She began to pace the floor, becoming increasingly agitated. "Oh my gods, she could be coming to Hogwarts too. Mum, we have to go over there, there's so much she doesn't know, she's probably not even been told yet, Mum, we have got to get over there!" she cried. Overcome with desperation, she headed for the door.

Realising that her daughter was serious, Caitlin leapt from her seat, covered the few feet between her and Deanna with ease and grabbed her arm.

"Deanna, you can't!"

Deanna spun round, jet black eyes flashing in fury.

"Why not? I've got to tell her, she can't go on not knowing!" she demanded.

"Yes," said Caitlin through gritted teeth, "but you can't just go storming over there! These things need time. They need diplomacy. They need to go through the official channels, for a start! We don't even know if it's true yet."

Deanna sagged, the fire going out of her. "Suppose you're right," she muttered. "So when will we know then?"

Releasing her, Caitlin walked over to the mirror hanging on one wall and tapped it with one end of a tapering wand of finest ash wood. "*Revelatio!*"

The mirror misted up, before clearing to reveal the Martins' front room, in which Luella and her parents appeared to be having the mother and father of all rows, before a vase on the mantelpiece exploded and Luella turned and stormed off. On the table were some rolls of what looked suspiciously like parchment not entirely dissimilar to Deanna's book list.

Caitlin banished the picture with a word and sheathed her wand.

"I think that just answered your question."

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Luella was lying upstairs on her bed when her mother knocked on the door.

"Luella! Luella! Come downstairs at once! Your father and I need to talk to you." Muttering, Luella rolled off the bed and followed her mother downstairs. This did not sound promising. Mrs. Martin never referred to Mr. Martin as "your father" unless she was in trouble. A look at her mother's face confirmed it. Mrs. Martin, normally a friendly, attractive woman in her early forties, had a very firm look on her face which clearly indicated that she had a lot of explaining to do. What it could be about, Luella had no idea. She went into the Martin's comfortable middle-class sitting room and sat down on the plush green three-piece suite. Mr. Martin, a balding, slightly overweight man with the same brown hair and blue eyes that all the family had, was holding what looked like a scroll. A couple of letters lay on the table, except that certainly wasn't A4 they were written on. They were rolled up for a start.

"Luella, what exactly is the meaning of this?" Mr. Martin's voice carried a mixture of both irritation and confusion. Luella, apprehensive, took the letter from him and read.

Dear Mr. and Mrs. Martin,

We are pleased to inform you that your daughter Luella has been selected to attend Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. We appreciate that this may come as a shock to you, however there is no doubt in our minds that Luella has natural magical ability, and is an ideal candidate for Hogwarts. While mindful of the fact that she is your daughter and her education yours to choose, we would like you to consider that if she does not attend Hogwarts, she will never learn how to use her powers appropriately, and they will be liable to erupting at occasions, particularly when your daughter is upset, angry, or otherwise emotionally excited. This tendency will increase as she gets older and her powers grow stronger. We therefore strongly recommend that you allow your daughter to attend Hogwarts, and return the attached reply slip to the address below. We enclose some literature about the school to enable you to make your choice. If you require assistance, please tick the appropriate box on the form and a member of our staff team will be pleased to visit you and answer any questions you may have. We hope to receive a reply by 1st August 1989.

Yours sincerely,

Prof. Albus Dumbledore, Headmaster

Luella looked up, stunned. Hogwarts School? Surely not that place Deanna was going to? Witchcraft and Wizardry? Natural magical powers? But that could only mean...

"I'm a witch?" Luella asked faintly.

Her parents looked at each other. They didn't look happy.

"Luella, is this some kind of a joke?" Mrs. Martin asked. "Witches don't exist, surely you know that? I know you wanted to go to this Hogwarts place that Deanna is going to, but really, writing a letter saying you've been selected? And why add the witchcraft bit?"

"Mum, Dad, I didn't write it! You know my handwriting, that's not it! It's not Deanna's either," she added quickly. It was exactly the sort of thing Deanna would do, but all the same, she didn't think even Deanna would go this far. And witchcraft? Surely not... but the more she thought about it, the more it made sense. All the strange things that she and Deanna had been able to do. The way they'd always felt not only different from everyone else, but somehow as though they were the same. And let's face it, Mrs. Tyler's lifestyle was hardly conventional. It was not difficult to believe she was a witch. Nor was it hard to believe Deanna had inherited her powers. But surely not her? Her family was as conventional as it was possible to get. How could she possibly be a witch?

"I promise you, I don't know anything about it, this is the first I've heard of it." She felt herself trembling. "I know Hogwarts is the name of Deanna's school, but honestly, I didn't know it had anything to do with magic! Really!"

Her parents looked sceptical. Mr. Martin was first to speak. "Well, if you say you don't know anything, then I believe you, but all the same, we're not happy about this."

"Witchcraft and Wizardry, indeed!" Mrs. Martin exclaimed. "What sort of fools do they take us for? Obviously some kind of stunt to lure innocent children away from their parents for Lord only knows what end. Well, they can forget it. You most certainly are not going."

She made to throw the package of documents away.

"No!" cried Luella, making a grab for them. "You can't! You can't not let me go there! Deanna's going, and if she can, why can't I?"

"Mrs. Tyler has the right to educate her daughter however she sees fit," Mr. Martin said stiffly. "And, as that letter reminds us, so do we. And if you think we're letting you disappear off to goodness knows where, you've got another think coming."

"And even if it was real and not a joke..." Mrs. Martin added.

"IT IS REAL!" Luella shouted, "Deanna's going, I keep telling you!"

"And even if it was real," Mrs. Martin continued, "do you really think you're studying witchcraft? It sounds quite dangerous. No, we think you're better off here."

"I don't believe this," Luella said, furious. "My one chance at getting out of this hellhole, of doing something constructive with my life, and you won't let me go! You're always spoiling my fun, always telling me what to do with my life, and I've had enough. You're not stopping me going to Hogwarts!" she shouted. A vase standing on the mantelpiece exploded, sending shards of china everywhere. Mr. and Mrs. Martin looked at its remains, open mouthed. Mr. Martin looked at Luella with a mixture of fear and anger. Luella stared back defiantly. "Go to your room. We'll discuss it later." he said.

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Luella turned and left. She was a witch. She had power. She was only eleven years old, and didn't know any spells, but she had the power. "I'm a witch, a witch!" she whispered to herself. Wait until Deanna heard this, she thought. All resentment forgotten, she could only imagine going to Hogwarts, learning magic, casting spells, having fun with Deanna. *Mrs. Tyler must be a witch too, she'll understand how important it is. She'll talk them round.*

She was halfway up the stairs when the doorbell rang. Turning round, she scrambled down the stairs and went to answer it.

Deanna was first to push inside, although once in, she just stopped and stared at Luella as if seeing her for the first time. "Well?" she asked. "Is it true?"

No need to ask what she meant. Their recent quarrel forgotten, Luella found herself smiling.

"Yeah," she whispered. "It is."

"I thought as much," Caitlin Tyler's voice said dryly as she edged inside. She too was looking at Luella with new eyes, but there was no surprise there. *She knows, and has known for a long time*, Luella realised. Somehow, the thought cheered her.

"May I take it your parents were a little shocked by the news?" Caitlin asked.

"You could say that," Luella admitted. "Mrs. Tyler, they won't let me go! Please, Mrs. Tyler, you're one too, aren't you? You can tell them it's real and not dangerous, can't you? Please?"

Deanna was shocked. "Not... not go?" She faltered, turning to her mother. "Mum, she can't not go! You said it yourself over breakfast, if Hogwarts wants you, you've got to go. Mum, you've got to make them see sense, you've got to!"

"I'll do my best," Caitlin promised, as Luella's mother arrived. She did not look happy.

"Is this anything to do with you?" she demanded, brandishing Luella's Hogwarts letter. Caitlin groaned inwardly. Time to play innocent.

"Is what anything to do with me?" she asked sweetly.

"This!" snapped Mrs. Martin, thrusting the letter into her hands. "This... witchcraft nonsense!"

Caitlin glanced down at her outfit ruefully. It wasn't exactly her most sorcerous attire, consisting of trainers, jeans, a white vest and a blue hooded top. She never had liked robes much.

"Do I look like a witch to you?" she asked with a laugh.

Mrs. Martin had to admit she didn't. "But Hogwarts is your daughter's school, is it not?" she flung back, not to be put off.

"Yes. It is, or soon will be." Caitlin abandoned the pretence and looked Mrs. Martin straight in the eye. "*There is nothing to be afraid of*," she said quietly, seeming to Luella to be concentrating unusually hard. And to her surprise, her mother's demeanour seemed to change at once, as the anger drained out of her.

"Caitlin, is it true?" she whispered, shaking all over. "Is she really a witch?"

Caitlin passed the letter back. "If you were sent one of these, then yes she is. But truly, Celia, it is nothing to be afraid of." Caitlin took Mrs. Martin's arm tenderly. "Come on, let's talk." She turned to the two girls. "You two run off and do whatever eleven year olds do. Don't get into mischief, you hear me?" With that, she led Luella's mother into the living room, closing the door behind her.

Luella watched as they left, desperate to know what was going to happen, which way her future was going to turn.

"Do you think she'll convince them?" she asked Deanna anxiously.

Deanna just rolled her eyes. "Duh. She's a witch. Course she'll do it. You saw what she can do. Face it Lu, your parents don't stand a chance."

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Mr. Martin looked up as the two women entered, swiftly covering his inner worries with his most officious persona. Yes, he was worried sick about Luella and terrified some maniac was after her, but that didn't mean half the neighbourhood needed to know it.

"Ah, Caitlin. Just the woman we were looking for. I was wondering if you could shed any light on this whole Hogwarts thing. I gather Celia has already told you all about it."

"She has." Caitlin took a seat, gearing up for battle. Even though she didn't doubt the outcome, that didn't mean she was looking forward to it.

"And?" Mr. Martin demanded. "Is there anything to it or not?"

"She says it's true," Mrs. Martin said, close to tears as she almost fell into the seat alongside Caitlin.

"What?" cried Mr. Martin, outraged. "Caitlin, I thought you had more sense. You're not seriously telling me you believe in this witchcraft rubbish?"

Ever so slowly, Caitlin turned to face him dead on. "You don't need to believe in what you use every day, Terry. I couldn't do my job without it. In fact, wouldn't have to do my job without it. That letter's true, every word of it. I know the author personally." She smiled rather sardonically. "Congratulations, Terry, Celia. You've got a witch in the family."

Mr. Martin looked distinctly unimpressed. "Now look here, Caitlin, we were hoping you'd lay this nonsense to rest once and for all. There's no such thing as witches."

Mrs. Tyler's smile faded. "No such thing, is there?" she said softly. Getting up, she reached into her jacket and produced her wand. Somehow, this simple gesture had a way of fixing the attention of both Muggles in a way all the fancy words couldn't, as the physical presence of something that couldn't really have any other purpose than magic made it all utterly, totally, real. Caitlin cast her eye on the remains of the vase Luella had smashed earlier. "Luella's broken an ornament, has she? I used to do that quite a bit too. My mother took to buying things purely for me to break. Relieved she was, when I turned eleven and she could pack me off to school. Allow me." She pointed the wand at the vase's remains and called out "*Reparo!*" The pieces of the vase gathered from all corners of the room and flew together. The vase glowed for a bit then stopped. Mrs. Martin got up to examine it. "The vase!" she gasped. "It's completely mended!"

"Let me see that." Mr. Martin demanded. He examined it too, then turned on Caitlin. "How did you do that?" he whispered, in a mixture of awe, fear and fury.

Caitlin remained unmoved. "I told you. I'm a witch. I do magic. That is what I do for a living, what I have been trained to do. And is there any explanation for what you have just seen than magic?"

The Martins shook their heads, openmouthed. Smiling grimly, Caitlin got to her feet and began pacing the room, no longer looking anything like the young mother she normally affected to being, but like some ancient and powerful sorceress stepped straight from the annals of myth.

"Magic exists. Witches exist. They can be born into any family, ranging from old magical families stretching back for generations like mine, to the most conventional, unmagical families, like yours. Deanna is a witch, so am I, so were all my mother's family. We all went to Hogwarts, Deanna will attend it this year. Luella is also a witch. And it is in her best interests that she goes also. Look at that vase. You don't think it will stop there? She's reaching adolescence, the time when a witch's power is at it's most volatile and uncontrollable. She needs to be in an environment where it can be tamed, and channelled into productive activities. An environment where there are more experienced mages to guide her. Where people are used to strange goings on and where she will not feel isolated and the odd one out. In short, Hogwarts." Caitlin caught her breath and looked at them. "She will not be happy anywhere else. You know that, don't you? She will either repress her power and be unhappy, or express it and be declared insane or worse. The choice is yours, but I hope you'll make the right one."

Mrs. Martin was first to speak. "I don't want her to get hurt..." she faltered. Caitlin nodded, coming to sit next to her again.

"I know," she said softly, taking Mrs. Martin's hand in hers. "I know, I don't like seeing Deanna hurt either. But you won't be able to keep her cocooned in your cosy middle-class home forever. One day, there will come a time when you won't be able to protect her, and she'll get hurt. Studying magic is no different from anything else in that regard. And I think that she will be less unhappy at Hogwarts than out of it."

Mrs. Martin nodded sadly, shooting a knowing glance at her husband. "That's all I want for her, to be happy. Honestly, she's such a strange, fey child at times, as if she's in another world entirely. I don't know how she'll cope with it all."

"Too right," Mr. Martin added with a sigh. "I love her dearly, but I certainly wouldn't say I understand her. I know that's a terrible thing to say about your own daughter but it's true."

"Well, at least now you know why," Caitlin said. "She's a witch, always has been. Your world is not hers, and I know it's painful to accept, but she doesn't really belong here. She should go to Hogwarts. It'll be for the best."

The Martins exchanged glances, coming to the same, mutual decision with heavy hearts. It would be for the best, as Caitlin said. Deep down, they'd always known Luella was different. At least this way she'd be happy.

"Well, if what you say is true, then I suppose we'll have to let her go. You're sure she'll be safe?" Mr. Martin asked, wanting to get that last point settled once and for all.

"Quite safe," Caitlin reassured her. "I would not be sending my own daughter there if I thought there was any danger."

The Martins looked at each other. "Well, if you're sure... we'd better send her then. She'll only complain otherwise." Mrs. Martin sighed. "Where do we get her uniform and things from?"

"More to the point, how much is this going to cost me?" Mr. Martin said, irritably. Now that things were actually settled, his accountant's mind was getting to grips with the practicalities.

"Hogwarts does not charge it's students any fees. All you pay for is the cost of school items such as stationery, a uniform, wand, set textbooks, that sort of thing. I daresay you'll receive a list when you've sent your reply slip back. As for actually buying them," here Caitlin really turned on the charm, "I need to travel to London to get Deanna's things anyway, why don't I take Luella? I'm sure she'd enjoy the trip. Save you the bother." She smiled her best Hollywood smile.

"Well, if you're sure..."

"Awfully good of you, I hope she won't be too much trouble for you."

"Oh, of course not, no trouble at all," Caitlin purred, inwardly relieved that things had gone so well. She'd been fully prepared for a fight, but no, they'd given in quite gracefully. *Luella, your parents are a credit to you*, she thought. She just hoped that, despite all her earlier confidence, things would turn out as happily as she'd made out.

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On the other side of the door, Deanna and Luella gave each other a high five followed by an impulsive hug.

"We're going to Hogwarts together! I don't believe it!" Luella whispered.

"You better believe it, mate," Deanna grinned back. "Welcome, my friend, to the world of magic!"

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Chapter Two Diagon Alley

A week later, and Caitlin was leading the two girls up Charing Cross Road, London. It was one of those rare summer days when the sun was out and the temperature in the mid-twenties. Normally, Luella lived for days like this, but normally, she wasn't in the middle of the big city, breathing in the traffic fumes and labouring in the heat which, unadulterated by greenery, was far fiercer than she was used to.

"Are we nearly there yet?" she moaned, longing for shade, a cool breeze and a very cold drink.

"Not far now," said Caitlin, sounding as weary as Luella felt. "We're nearly there. Gods, how I hate London sometimes."

"Where are we going anyway?" Luella asked. For all the build-up, she still didn't know exactly where this place was. Or for that matter, what it was.

"You'll see," Caitlin told her.

Deanna, who until now had remained uncharacteristically quiet, chose this moment to speak up.

"We're going to Diagon Alley. It's Magic Central. Where everyone gets their magical supplies from. There's a secret entrance just up here somewhere."

"Oh, Deanna, you've spoiled the surprise," Caitlin pouted. "Never mind. We're here now anyway." She stopped outside a medieval looking pub called the Leaky Cauldron. "In here, children," she trilled as she slipped inside.

Luella hesitated. "Are we allowed in here?" she asked Deanna anxiously.

"Yeah, don't worry," Deanna yawned. "You'll be fine." She indicated for Luella to go ahead. Taking a deep breath, Luella did so.

The sight that greeted her was amazing. It looked like an old country pub, with wooden timbers everywhere, leather seating, closed-in old-fashioned booths, and pumps on the bar serving unusual and elsewhere unheard of beers. So far, so normal. What was different, however, was the clientele. Luella expected pubs to be full of old men with pipes, drinking beer. And this one was. However, they didn't normally wear star spangled robes and pointy hats, and Luella was sure that pipe smoke was not meant to be green. Well, if she hadn't believed in magic before, she certainly did now. A few of them looked up, but gave neither her nor Deanna a second glance. Caitlin, however, dressed in a terracotta strapless top, jeans and a pair of cowboy boots, was attracting more than her fair share of attention, although oddly enough, no one seemed to want to catch her eye.

Deanna seemed unmoved by it all, having obviously seen it all before, and chose a seat by the window. Luella joined her.

"What is this place?" Luella whispered, thrilled.

"The Leaky Cauldron," Deanna whispered back. "Magic pub. We're allowed in here, the magical community has a fairly relaxed attitude to licensing laws. Muggle policemen can't even see this pub anyway, so we're safe."

"What about the magical ones?" Luella asked. Deanna grinned and glanced at her mother, busy ordering what looked suspiciously like beer.

"Nearest thing to one in this pub is getting the drinks in right now. We'll be fine."

Fortunately for Luella's state of mind, the drinks turned out to be perfectly non-alcoholic banana smoothies, albeit served in beer tankards. Deanna raised an eyebrow as her mother brought them over.

"Smoothies? In a tankard? New one on me, mum."

"Now, now, Deanna. You mustn't blame the barman; muggle drinks aren't exactly his forte after all," said Caitlin as she took a seat and began to sip her drink. "Still, they taste alright. We'll turn this place into Cafe Rouge yet. So Luella. Want to show us that parcel you got this morning?"

Luella reached for her bag with a start. She'd forgotten about the parcel. It had arrived by owl post about five minutes before they'd been due to leave. She'd not had time to look at it properly, yet had been too curious to abandon it, so she'd brought it with her. And now both Tylers were looking at her expectantly.

Ripping open the brown paper, she opened the box within to reveal a small, leather-bound tome with gold leaf edging. Deanna leaned over her shoulder and read the title out loud.

"Hogwarts: A Prospectus," she read. "Cool, they sent you a prospectus!" She turned to her mother, mildly outraged. "How come they didn't send me a prospectus? I want a prospectus!"

"Deanna, you're mage-raised, you don't need one," Caitlin sighed. "I'm sure Luella'll let you borrow hers."

Luella was not slow to take the hint. Flipping open the book, she started to show it to Deanna. And promptly dropped it with a shriek, causing half the pub to look at her, before glancing away muttering things like "Kids" and "Ruddy Muggle borns". "The pictures! They're.... they're *moving*!"

Deanna couldn't help sniggering, and even Caitlin couldn't resist smiling. "Course they are," Deanna grinned. "All magical photographs do that. Get used to it, kiddo."

"So what's in there anyway?" Caitlin asked idly. "I can't say I've ever seen a copy, they certainly never had them in my day."

"Not much," said Luella, scanning the contents. "Brief history. Welcome bits. Description of subjects and houses. Stuff on extra-curricular activities. Oh, and an introduction to the teachers."

"Really?" asked Caitlin, reaching out for it. "Let's have a look, I want to find out if I know any of them. I only really know the Headmaster." She turned to the appropriate page, revealing a picture of an elderly smiling wizard looking for all the world like Merlin in Luella's *Stories of King Arthur* book.

"And there he is," Caitlin smiled. "Professor Albus Dumbledore. A highly likeable man. Good to his students. You can trust him, and if you ever have a problem, he'll be able to help you. Remember his name, Luella. He was one of the shining lights of our kind during the War."

"The war?" Luella asked. Somehow, she did not think Caitlin meant World War Two. "What war is that then?"

"A war you're lucky to have missed," said Caitlin, suddenly appearing very grim indeed; although moments later, she was all smiles again. "Who else have we got here, ah yes. Professor Minerva McGonagall. Deputy Headmistress, Head of Gryffindor House, Professor of Transfiguration, Registered Animaga. Watch out for her, she's very strict. Stay on the right side of her though, and you will be fine. She's not needlessly cruel."

Luella did not feel very relieved. Professor McGonagall was looking very sternly at her for some reason.

"Professor Delphinia Sprout, Head of Hufflepuff House, Professor of Herbology." Professor Sprout looked nicer, in a round, maternal way. "She's nice, very patient, especially with first years. Just don't damage any of the plants. Then there's Professor George Flitwick, Professor of Charms, Head of Ravenclaw House. Is he still teaching? Good lord. A bit excitable, but a good teacher nonetheless." Professor Flitwick was waving at them from the photo, which combined with his small stature, made him look for all the world like a prematurely aged schoolboy.

"Now to find out who's Head of Slytherin. They appointed a new one in the early eighties, but I never did find out who it was." Caitlin turned the page, eyes alive with curiosity. Deanna whispered in Luella's ear,

"Mum used to be in Slytherin, that's why she wants to know."

Caitlin looked down at the Head of Slytherin and froze, eyes widening in what surely couldn't be fear? Feeling slightly worried herself, Luella looked to see what had thrown her. Scowling back at them was a very pale man with dark greasy hair and a slightly hooked nose, dressed in deep black robes. But the most noticeable feature of all was his deathly black eyes. Cold, they were, and full of anger. His expression said quite clearly "You'd better be pretty damn good to impress me." Luella gave an involuntary shudder. Deanna, alone of the three, was not frightened.

"Oh good. My likely future House Head is Satan. Wonderful. Mum, who is he anyway, and why do we have to have the dictator?" Deanna pouted.

Somehow, Caitlin managed to snap herself out of it. "His name, Deanna, is Severus Snape," she said softly, her eyes blazing. "I don't know why Dumbledore hired him, but I suspect there's more to it than meets the eye. There usually is where he's concerned." She slammed the book shut just a little too vehemently, as if glad to get rid of those haunting dark eyes. Haunting... and haunted.

"He just looked frightened to me," Luella whispered. "Like he's on the run from something and doesn't want it to catch up with him."

"So he damn well should," Caitlin hissed, furious. She pushed the book roughly back to Luella. "Put it away, child. I've seen enough."

Exchanging glances with Deanna, Luella did as she was asked. Not daring to ask the inevitable question herself, she indicated for Deanna to do it. She was not slow in obliging.

"So, er, Mum. What did he do to get up your nose, then?"

Caitlin just turned away and laughed.

"Deanna, let's just say he and I have unfinished business and leave it at that, shall we? We went to school together then lost contact," Caitlin said by way of explanation, the look on her face indicating that this topic was very definitely closed.

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Luella soon had other things to think about, and the conversation regarding Professor Snape found itself pushed to the back of her mind as they finished their drinks and left the pub by the back door. Here they found themselves in a small courtyard, empty except for a few bins.

"Is this it?" Luella asked, frowning. "Doesn't look like much to me."

"Patience, Luella," Caitlin smiled, producing her wand. "Many things in this world are not what they seem at first. Something you'll learn soon enough. Now watch carefully. You too, Deanna," she added sharply, seeing her daughter's attention wander. "You'll need to know how to do this yourselves eventually. This is how you get into Diagon Alley. Third brick up, second from the left. Tap it three times with your wand and say *Alohomora!*"

The wall shimmered and faded, leaving a stone archway behind, leading into a narrow winding street which could only be Diagon Alley. Luella gazed at it in awe.

"Wow," she whispered.

"Wow indeed," Caitlin smiled. "This, children, is Diagon Alley."

First stop was the magic bank, Gringotts. Luella handed over the money her parents had given her and had them converted into magic currency, Galleons, Sickles and Knuts. Then she had to endure the cart ride into the bowels of Gringotts to the Tylers' vault, where Caitlin filled her moneybags from the dazzling array of coins stacked up there. Clearly she had not been exaggerating when she said she came from an old magical family, Luella thought.

Next was a trip to Madam Malkin's robe shop. Here, they were in for a surprise. An imposing looking witch in her mid thirties was watching a young witch looking in the window. From the pale blonde hair and skin, and the small, delicately pointed features they shared, it was clear that they were mother and daughter.

It was also clear that they were no strangers to the Tylers. Caitlin's eyes narrowed as she strode forward, while Deanna gritted her teeth, clearly not wanting anything to do with either of them.

"Who are they?" Luella asked, wondering what on earth they'd done to upset her.

"My godmother and her daughter," Deanna muttered. "Auntie Mel's OK, if a little distant. But her daughter's a nightmare. Right little stuck up cow."

Caitlin had slowed her pace and was now creeping stealthily up behind the older woman, as if to surprise her. She almost made it too, but as she drew her wand, her target whirled round, grabbed her by the wrist and spun her round into an armlock. The two women locked eyes, before dissolving into laughter, as Caitlin found herself released.

"Caitlin, Caitlin, Caitlin," the other witch chided her with a smile. "You'll have to do a lot better than that to surprise me."

"Damn, and I thought I'd done so well too," Caitlin pouted. "I used Glamoury too."

"You did," nodded the other woman. "On yourself. But not on Deanna, I'm afraid. Soon as I saw her reflection in the glass, I knew you wouldn't be far away."

"Dammit," Caitlin swore. "Never mind. Next time, Mel Lovegood. Next time." She noticed Luella staring at her as if she'd gone mad. "Don't look so worried, Luella! Standard Auror greeting, nothing to worry about." She turned back to her friend. "Melissa, this is Luella Martin, a friend of my daughter's. She's starting Hogwarts this year. Luella, this is Melissa Lovegood, Head of the Department of Dark Arts Eradication, our police force. And an old friend of mine."

"Hello," Luella said nervously.

Melissa Lovegood just smiled. "Hello there. Enjoying the magical world so far?"

Luella nodded. "It's cool," she replied.

"Sounds like something my daughter would say," Melissa remarked. "Speaking of which..." She turned to her daughter, who was still staring at a black sparkly formal dress in the window of Madam Malkin's. "Marlie, you're far too young for it."

"Ohhh," sulked Marlie, turning away. "Mum, that's so unfair. Bet Dad'd let me have it."

"He would not," Melissa told her. "Not until you're older anyway. Marlie, this is Luella Martin. She's going to be a schoolmate of yours. Luella, my daughter Marlie."

Marlie looked Luella up and down. Seeming to approve of what she saw, she responded with a smile. Not a very big smile, but a smile nonetheless.

"Hello there," she drawled, holding out a hand. "Marlie Lovegood. Pleased to meet you."

Luella took her hand, still uncertain. There was something about Marlie, something that wasn't quite right. Something... false. A stuck-up cow, Deanna had called her. Luella had the feeling that that wasn't the half of it.

"Pleased to meet you too," she smiled back, hoping that Marlie didn't pick up on insincerity as well as she did.

"Muggle-born, I take it," Marlie said, eyeing Luella's outfit, which consisted of denim shorts, trainers and a green Benetton t-shirt.

"Um, yeah," Luella replied, suddenly feeling embarrassed without knowing why. After all, Marlie herself was wearing flared jeans, blue and white canvas plimsolls, imitation Ray-Bans, and a sleeveless top with 'Sagittarian Kitten' written on it, next to a picture of a kitten with a bow and arrow, while her mother was wearing a sleeveless plain white top, smart black trousers and a matching jacket slung over her shoulder. Neither would look out of place in any high street in the country.

"That's OK," Marlie replied breezily. "My dad's a Muggle too. Works with aircraft. He's very talented."

"Mine's an accountant," Luella said, still feeling as if she was admitting all her family were criminals.

"Someone has to be," sighed Marlie. She turned and noticed Deanna for the first time. "Oh. You're here."

"You think my mother would take my best mate and not me?" Deanna bristled. "Get real, Lovegood." She was glaring at Marlie with all the ferocity she could muster. Marlie for her part was doing a good job of looking down on her for someone who was shorter.

"Comparing the two of you, I can't say I wouldn't," Marlie murmured, lowering her voice so the adults didn't hear her. However, she was all innocence and smiles as her mother called her name.

"Marlie, dear, Caitlin and I are going to get your schoolbooks, so we'll leave you three here to get measured for your robes. That alright with you?"

"Perfectly, Mum," Marlie beamed, although Luella could tell by her eyes that it was anything but perfect. Deanna for her part was silently imploring her mother not to be left alone with her.

"We won't be long," Caitlin promised, guessing what was on her daughter's mind. "I need to have a word with your Auntie Mel, that's all. We'll be right back."

Deanna groaned but did not complain. Money and book lists changed hands and the two grown-ups departed, leaving three children, two of whom were staring murderously at each other.

"Well," Marlie said coldly, "shall we go in?"

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"Was that a good idea?" Melissa asked as Caitlin led her away. "I'm not sure it's a good idea to leave our two alone for any longer than necessary - I saw the way they were looking at each other - hey!"

Caitlin had grabbed her by the arm and hauled her in to a side alley.

"Severus Snape is Head of Slytherin now. Did you know?"

"Caitlin, I -"

"Did you know?" Caitlin hissed, thrusting her against a wall. "Did you? Hmm?"

Anyone else would have been worried. However, when you dealt with the Dark Arts every day, one annoyed Auror wasn't the worst thing that could happen.

"Caitlin," Melissa said softly. "Put... me... down!" She grabbed Caitlin by the wrist and detached her in one flowing move, sending her staggering back.

Caitlin eyed her friend warily, clutching her wrist. "Ow."

"Don't threaten me again, Caitlin," said Melissa, not taking her eyes off the other woman. "Yes, I knew. Because of his past, Dumbledore had to clear it with Crouch first - they wanted me as a character reference."

"And you were going to tell me about this when?" Caitlin fumed. "Before or after Deanna graduated?"

"I was going to, but you said you didn't want to hear his name mentioned," said Melissa. "Every time the syllable 'Sev-' passed my lips, you blocked your ears and refused to listen."

That had her. Caitlin couldn't deny that this was true.

"That's not the point," she muttered. "You should have written it down or something. You should have told me, Mel."

"And what would you have done if I had?" Melissa said tenderly, her attitude softening. "Where else would she have gone? She doesn't speak a word of French, so Beauxbatons is out of the question. You've said yourself you'd never send any child of yours to Durmstrang, and would you really want her going to America? It's a long way, Caitlin. And you can't exactly home-school her, can you?"

"Suppose," Caitlin sighed. "Gods, Mel!" She buried her head in her hands. "What am I going to do? You know what he's like, he'll guess as soon as he lays eyes on her! And a look at the school records will confirm it. Suppose he tells her? Suppose he gives it away accidentally? Suppose he gets in touch with me again? I don't think I could bear it, Mel, I really couldn't!" Caitlin was near tears by this stage.

Melissa put her arms around her, trying to comfort her friend. "Caitlin. Caitlin, ssh. Don't cry. Look at me." She lifted her friend's chin with a single finger, so Caitlin found herself looking straight into Melissa's eyes.

"Cait, you're gonna be alright," Melissa said gently. "If you do meet him again, you'll cope. Because you're strong. Stronger than you know, and a lot stronger than Severus. Mainly because you know. He doesn't even suspect. He may well guess. But if he does, you'll have me for support. And I will do my level best to make sure that he does nothing that would upset you or Deanna."

"Thanks, Mel," Caitlin whispered, before breaking out into a smile. "Come on, we'd better get back to the shopping, get as much as we can done before our daughters kill each other."

"Suppose we'd best," smiled Melissa, linking arms with Caitlin. "Although if Marlie killed Deanna, it would solve the Severus problem... Kidding!" she laughed as Caitlin glared at her, before hauling her friend off in the direction of the nearest cauldron shop.

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Meanwhile, back in Madam Malkin's, the three girls were up on stools being measured. Marlie and Deanna were doing a superb job of ignoring each other, backs turned, arms folded when they could get away with it, room temperature plummeting. While Luella, stuck helplessly in the middle, was desperately trying to make conversation.

"So, you two already know each other, do you?" Luella asked. "How'd you meet?"

"We got stuck with her whenever her mum couldn't find a babysitter," Marlie snapped.

"Mum used to leave me there when she had to work nights," Deanna said, pointedly ignoring Marlie. "Quite a nice house, really. Shame about the daughter though."

Marlie appeared to be seething under her breath, but to her credit, did not react. However, that was only because her robes were currently full of pins. Luella had the feeling that as soon as those robes were off, there'd be a fight, and there were an awful lot of sharp implements around. In a vain bid to break the tension, she decided to ask about Hogwarts. Good thing she'd had the chance to look at the prospectus earlier, really.

"So, Marlie, what do you know about how we end up in houses? The prospectus says it's based on personal qualities."

Marlie seemed to calm down at this, shaking her hair back with a purr, and launching into a lecture. This was obviously a subject she knew something about.

"Well, there's four houses, named after the four mages who founded Hogwarts. They're called Gryffindor, Ravenclaw, Hufflepuff and Slytherin. The founders used to choose students for their classes based on the qualities they prized most highly, and that turned into the present house system. Gryffindor preferred the reckless fools, Ravenclaw the nerds, Hufflepuff the dull, boring worthy types and Slytherin the talented, interesting people."

Deanna snorted. "No prizes for guessing where your biases lie."

Marlie looked slightly insulted. "There is nothing wrong with having a preference for which house you want to be in. Mum's told me about all the houses, and I think Slytherin's the best. Anyway, I believe your mother was also in Slytherin."

Deanna didn't reply, she just scowled. Luella could only roll her eyebrows. Never mind Marlie and Deanna fighting, she might be slapping Deanna herself in a minute. Only the other day, Deanna had been talking about Slytherin House and how much she wanted to be part of it. Still, if she could defuse things, she would.

"So why do you like Slytherin then? What's so good about it? Forgive me, but I'm Muggle-born and don't know these things," Luella smiled, desperately trying to warm the atmosphere up.

Marlie immediately launched into her sales pitch. "Well, my mum was one, and my brother Mike, he's one too. They're really good, they've won the Quidditch Cup and the House Cup for the past five years running. That's mostly why I want in, they're the best at Quidditch and I've always wanted to be a professional Seeker."

"Quidditch? Seeker?" Luella looked confused.

"Oh, of course, you wouldn't know, would you?" Marlie smiled, her manner slightly deprecating, but nonetheless not unfriendly. "Quidditch is the sport in the magical world. We play it on broomsticks, two teams of seven each. There's three hoops at each end, fifty feet off the ground. The idea is for each team to get the main ball, called the Quaffle, through the other team's hoops. You get ten points each time you score. That's the job of the Chasers. Each team has three. Each team also has a Keeper, who flies in front of their hoops and has to stop the Quaffle from going through them."

Luella, somewhat confused, attempted to process what she'd just heard. "OK, so there's three Chasers, trying to get the Quaffle through the other team's goal hoops, and the other side's Keeper trying to stop them. Simple enough. OK, so that's four. What do the other three on each team do?"

"Well, two of them are called Beaters. They fly around with bats in their hand. It's their job to protect their team from these other two balls flying around. They're called Bludgers, and they fly around trying to knock players off their brooms. The Beaters have to knock the Bludgers away from their team and towards the opposition."

Luella looked thoroughly confused now. "So there's also two balls called Bludgers flying around and the Beaters have to keep them away from their side?"

Marlie nodded. "That's right. Then you have the most important player of all, the Seeker. That's the position I want to play in."

"And what does the Seeker do?"

"Well, the Seeker has to look for ball number four, the Golden Snitch. It's a small, golden, winged ball that flies around very fast. The Seeker has to keep an eye out for it and catch it. Capturing the Snitch earns your team 150 points. It also means the end of the game, so whoever catches the Snitch usually wins the game for their team. Seekers are usually small and light, so I'd be well suited physically."

Deanna gave another snort, but didn't say anything. Luella looked at her meaningfully.

By this time, Madam Malkin had finished with them, and their robes were ready. They collected and paid for them, and headed off to Flourish and Blott's. Luella allowed Marlie to go ahead so she could talk to Deanna.

"Well? Is this going to go on every time we meet?"

"Probably," Deanna shrugged.

Luella sighed. "Deanna, she's going to school with us. We have seven years with her. They're not going to be any fun if you keep winding her up!"

Deanna stopped in her tracks.

"Look, Lu, you saw what she was like! She's a little snob who looks down on everyone. A spoilt little brat who thinks the world revolves around her!" Deanna looked at Luella, appealing to her better judgement. "Come on, she was looking down on you too."

Luella had to admit that she had felt a little inferior.

"But that doesn't mean we shouldn't give her the benefit of the doubt. She might be nice deep down!"

"Very deep down," said Deanna. "Flamin' hell, Lu, you're too nice for your own good, you know that?"

"Well, you know, it beats being a git," Luella grinned. She noticed that Marlie had already found her mother, and that Deanna's mother was standing next to her, calling for them both to hurry up. Taking Deanna's arm, she led her over.

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Melissa and Caitlin were waiting outside with three bulging Flourish and Blott's bags between them. They'd also bought some basic Potions equipment for their charges, which was packed tightly into three large Apothecary bags.

"Ready?" Caitlin asked. "We thought we'd get your animals next, then go to Ollivander's for your wands. We've got your books and other equipment. If you'd like to carry these, while we have the books..." Bags were exchanged, and the party of five moved off towards the Magical Menagerie.

Inside was a bewildering variety of creatures. Quite aside from the usual selection of owls, cats, toads, and rats, there were lizards, fish, bizarre looking tropical birds, tortoises and some very strange creatures with two heads Luella had never seen before. Before she could ask what they were, she found herself steered round to a section marked "Hogwarts Animals".

"Here we are," Melissa announced. "You can choose a cat, toad, or owl. Marlie, come with me, tell me what you'd like."

Deanna and Luella gathered round to have a look, as Marlie was drawn away by her mother. Caitlin stood behind to give advice.

"Don't bother with the toads, they've not been in fashion for years. All they seem to do is get lost. Owls are great companions and very useful for delivering letters, although Hogwarts has its own owls for students' use. However, if you want special magical powers get yourselves cats. They're far more intuitive."

Deanna gazed at the owls. "Nice. I like that barn owl over there. It's cute."

Luella let the conversation drift over her as she looked at the cats. One in particular caught her eye. A black cat with a thin ring of silver fur round its neck looked back at her. Luella opened the cage and picked it up. "Hello, you. Fancy being a witch's cat?" she murmured to it. The cat purred and nuzzled her. The witch behind the counter called over to her.

"Are you thinking of buying that cat?"

Luella carried the cat over. "What's it called?"

"Her name's Sootica. Yours for four Galleons."

Luella looked at her. "Sootica. Sooty cat. Sooty. Sooty cat-Sootica." She tickled her under the chin. Sootica purred and slow-blinked. "I'll take her." The money was handed over, and Sootica installed securely in a cat-basket. Luella went to find Deanna, and saw her stroking a small brown and white owl nestling on her shoulder.

Deanna smiled. "Meet Spooky. Gorgeous, isn't he?"

Luella had to admit he was lovely. She was joined by Marlie, who was cradling a white fluffy cat with green eyes.

"Is that your owl then, Tyler? He's rather cute. Bit small though," she sneered.

"He'll do," Deanna said coldly. "At least I won't be having to borrow owls whenever I want to write home."

Luella swiftly decided that now would be a good time to change the subject. If Madam Malkin's had not been a good venue for a fight, a shop full of possibly dangerous animals with teeth and claws was even less ideal.

"Who's the cat?" Luella asked.

"This?" Marlie asked. "He's called Snow Emperor. Snowy." Snowy purred.

Deanna couldn't resist sneering at this. "Snow Emperor? Who the hell picked that name?"

Marlie glared back. "A cat of breeding deserves a name that reflects that." She turned back to her cat, tickling him under the chin. "I think Snowy suits him fine. Doesn't it, Snowy-kins?"

Deanna rolled her eyes. "Come on, let's pay for these and find Mum. What's yours, Lu?"

"Sootica. Sooty."

"Sweet. Proper witch's cat, anyway. Good name. I like her."

Deanna followed Marlie to the counter to pay for Spooky as Caitlin approached them.

"All set?"

"Just about. Deanna's getting an owl. I've got Sooty here. Marlie's got some white fluffball."

Caitlin bent down to look at Sooty. "Ahh, she's sweet. You've got yourself a proper cat there. She's smart. Ah, Deanna, you're ready." She straightened up as Deanna approached with Spooky in a cage. "Time to move on. Enough of the fripperies, it's now time for your most important bit of kit." She gazed out of the window at Ollivander's Wand Emporium. "Time to get your wands."

Ollivander's was a small place from the outside, but once inside, the piles of boxes stacked up all around made it look bigger. Mr. Ollivander, a small thin man, looked up as they walked in.

"Welcome, dear ladies. Melissa Harker, now Lovegood, and Caitlin Tyler. I remember your wands as though it were yesterday. Yours, Ms. Tyler, was apple with a unicorn hair. Nine inches, flexible. Good for charm work. And yours, Mrs. Lovegood, was oak with a dragon's heart string. Exceptionally good for duelling and all anti-dark work. Seven inches, durable. And these must be your daughters. Off to Hogwarts, I see."

Luella and Deanna were both a little afraid of him and hung back. Even Marlie, normally so extrovert and self-styled expert on the magical world, seemed a little nervous.

Melissa turned to the three girls. "Well? Marlie?"

Marlie stepped forward nervously. Mr. Ollivander measured her, looked thoughtful, and disappeared into the back room, returning with an armful of boxes. Marlie waved each one in turn, but nothing happened. Mr. Ollivander, unworried, fetched some more for her. Marlie, becoming increasingly anxious, waved them all, until, to her relief, one emitted a shower of pale blue sparks, which turned into a transparent white owl. The owl looked around, hooted softly and flew off, before vanishing into thin air. Marlie clasped her wand, and gasped in delight.

Mr. Ollivander looked pleased. "Seven inches, whippy, willow with a unicorn tail hair. Pussy willow, to be precise. Excellent for transfiguration. Six Galleons, please."

Melissa paid, seemingly quite pleased with her daughter. Mr. Ollivander turned to Caitlin.

"And can I be of assistance to you, Ms. Tyler?"

Caitlin smiled, all charm. "I'm wanting wands for my daughter Deanna and her friend Luella Martin, if you would be so kind. Deanna?"

Deanna stepped forward, doing her best to hide her anxiety. It was almost working too. Mr. Ollivander measured her without a word and went to find wands for her to try. It did not seem to take long this time. On around the fifth wand, Deanna succeeded in causing a jet of red and white fire to shoot out of it, singeing Mr. Ollivander's eyebrows.

"Nine inches, sturdy, ash, tail of a phoenix. Another wand good for an Auror-in-waiting. You will do well with that one, Miss Tyler. And now for you, Miss Martin."

Luella stepped forward, gulping. Here was her first attempt at real magic. Proof of whether she was a witch or not. She couldn't help feeling a little nervous. After all, both Marlie and Deanna had witch mothers. Of course they could do magic. She was

just an accountant's daughter from Surrey. What if she tried every wand in the shop and nothing happened? Would Mr. Ollivander declare that there must have been some kind of mistake and she wasn't really a witch at all? The prospect of ending up back at a local high school while Deanna was off turning people into frogs did not appeal.

Apprehensive, she waited while Mr. Ollivander measured her and brought some wands for her to try. Trembling, she took the first wand offered her ("ten inches, flexible, elm") and waved it. Nothing. She tried another. Again nothing. This went on for what seemed like hours. Luella began to panic. She was right, she wasn't really a witch at all, none of these wands would work for her. It was then that Mr. Ollivander handed her one that felt just that little bit different from the rest. It felt warmer, more powerful to the touch. Luella felt a wave of energy go rushing up her spine as she held it up. A feeling of utter confidence took possession of her, and almost dismissively, she waved it.

A silver snake with green eyes, not illusion like Marlie's owl, but very, very real, leapt out of the end of the wand and reared up, hissing violently, announcing its power to the world before levitating into the air, grasping its tail between its teeth and spinning until it seemed to be a plain silver circle suspended in midair. All the light seemed to vanish out of the rest of the shop as the snake took on a luminescent shine of its own. Luella watched, transfixed, as the rest of the world seemed to die away, leaving nothing but her and the snake.

Until the snake sped up to an impossible speed, then exploded into a shower of green sparks which formed a design bearing a vague resemblance to a DNA helix before disappearing into nothingness. Luella felt the power fade, the adrenaline crash, and the hairs on the back of her neck settle down, as she blinked and watched the world return. She was still trembling, but was no longer in any doubt about her witch status. In fact, she was now rather afraid of the power. She turned to look at the others, wondering what on earth they were thinking about it all. Deanna and Marlie were both staring at her open-mouthed.

"What was that, Lu?" Deanna whispered.

"Don't know, but it was pretty cool!" Marlie gasped. "Do it again!"

Mr. Ollivander, however, looked as if he was about to have a heart attack. "Twelve inches, swishy, hazel. Contains dragon heartstring," he managed to stammer, before staring at Luella. "Who are you?" he demanded.

Luella felt her mouth go dry, having no idea how to answer that one. Helpless, she turned to Caitlin.

The two Aurors exchanged glances.

"Go on, Cait," said Melissa. "Do it, and let's go. Less said about this the better."

Caitlin nodded, and approached Mr. Ollivander with a smile.

"Forget," she said, an aura of power surrounding her. "Forget, and remember only that you sold three wands to Melissa and me. Three perfectly ordinary wands, for three perfectly ordinary children." She took out a money bag. "Take twenty five Galleons for the wands, and be happy." Leaving the money on the counter, she turned and ushered the two girls out of the shop. Melissa was already herding Marlie out into the street.

"Mum, what was all that about?" Marlie was asking loudly. "What's up with Luella, and why all the secrecy and messing about with memories?"

"Keep your voice down, child!" Melissa was heard hissing. "Not another word until we get home. Now, we're going to meet your brother, and you're going to act as if everything was normal and nothing untoward happened. Alright?"

Marlie muttered in protest, but she did keep quiet as her mother hustled her away. Deanna turned to her own mother as soon as the Lovegoods had gone.

"Mum, what was that about? No one produces magic like that when they've only just got their wand!" She was looking at Luella rather oddly, and Luella didn't like it one bit.

"What's happening?" she asked, gazing up at Caitlin with terrified eyes. "Why is everyone so freaked? What's wrong with me?"

"Nothing," Caitlin soothed her, although Luella could see the worry in her eyes. "Don't be afraid, Luella, everything'll be alright. But this does change things." Caitlin stared into space, an almost haunted look on her face. "Yes, this changes everything."

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Chapter Three Slytherin Secrets

The journey home was a distinctly tense affair. Caitlin was in no mood to talk, snapping at them for the littlest things, so both Deanna and Luella said very little. Luella felt sick inside. What had she done? Why had that snake appeared? There was no doubt that it was the Slytherin house emblem, but if that was all it was, why had the Aurors reacted the way they had? Why the need to erase Mr. Ollivander's memory? And why had Melissa Lovegood told her own daughter to keep quiet, mention this to no one and act as if everything was normal? Caitlin had told her not to worry, but Luella had a feeling that she hadn't been entirely truthful. Deanna was now shooting some rather strange glances in her direction. It was difficult to tell if she was afraid of her or merely very impressed.

The atmosphere was still tense as they arrived back at the Tylers' bungalow. Luella wasn't sure about accepting Caitlin's offer of tea, but on the other hand, who else could she talk to about what happened?

Deanna was on her mother's case as soon as they were all inside.

"Mum, what happened?" she demanded. "And don't tell me that it was nothing to worry about! I saw the way you and Auntie Mel reacted! You only act like that when you're working! What's up with Lu, and why all the secrecy?" She had the look of one not to be put off by idle excuses.

"Let me get a foot in the door, why don't you?" her mother snapped, clearly rattled. "Listen, why don't you go and put the kettle on, then we can gather in the kitchen, have some tea, and I'll tell you everything you need to know. OK?"

"Heard that one before," Deanna muttered. However, she did do as she was told.

Luella turned to Caitlin, not reassured by any of this. "Mrs. Tyler, what's really going on? What's wrong with me?" she begged, desperate for an answer.

"Nothing's wrong with you," Caitlin reassured her, and Luella had the feeling that in this at least, she was telling the truth. "As a witch, you've nothing to complain about. You're not inferior." She looked at Luella again, staring at her almost in awe. "But you might wish you were at times. Come on, let's go and sit down. I'll tell you everything." She led Luella into the kitchen.

Deanna was waiting for them, preparing three mugs of tea.

"Do you take sugar in yours, Lu?"

"Um, yeah," said Luella, momentarily distracted. "Just one, thanks."

"One spoonful or two for you, Mum?"

"Two," said Caitlin firmly. She reconsidered for a moment. "Actually, make it three."

Deanna raised an eyebrow, but said nothing, adding the extra sugar. Soon the tea was ready and they were seated around the kitchen table with a mug each.

"So Mum," said Deanna softly. "You gonna tell us what's up with Lu?"

Caitlin nodded, taking a sip of her drink. She was drinking out of a green mug with the Slytherin coat of arms on one side, and a pair of crossed broomsticks on the other, with a scroll underneath reading 'Hogwarts Quidditch Cup Winner, 1972-73'. Luella realised she'd seen it before but had never really noticed the now obvious magical references. Maybe it was because she now knew she was a witch, and could see these things.

"First of all," Caitlin began, "I want you both to promise me that you will not reveal what I am about to tell you to anyone. That, Luella, includes your parents. They're Muggles, they wouldn't understand, it's probably best they don't know. Is that clear?"

Luella and Deanna both nodded.

"Good," said Caitlin approvingly. "Because not all of what I am about to tell you is common knowledge. Much of it is frightening, and not a little is actually dangerous. Especially for you, Luella."

"Oh god," Luella whispered, clutching on to her own mug, a Thundercats mug that Deanna was very attached to.

"If it's so dangerous, why are you telling us?" Deanna asked, rather pointedly. "I'm not so curious that I'd want to put Lu's life in danger!"

"Because you've already seen too much, and not knowing would put you both in far more danger than knowing the truth!" Caitlin retorted sharply. She lowered her voice as Deanna flinched back, clearly affected by her mother's words. "Listen, I'm sorry if I sound harsh. But this is important, and your lives could be on the line here. So try not to take any of this personally - I don't mean to hurt you. It's just that it won't do either of you any long-term favours if I hold back out of politeness. As you can see from the mug," she showed it to them both with a smile, "I'm a former member of Slytherin House. And a highly successful Quidditch Chaser too, but that's neither here nor there," she added. "Deanna, you too could well end up there. And as for you, Luella..." She fixed Luella with a probing stare. "I think you may well find yourself there too. Which means there are things about it you'll need to know." She paused for breath and launched into a monologue.

"Over the years, all four houses have produced powerful individuals. Some good, some bad. However, Slytherin has produced more than its fair share of dark mages over the years. Salazar Slytherin himself was rumoured to practice the Dark Arts. He is known to have opposed the acceptance of Muggle or part-Muggle children at Hogwarts, giving rise to a lot of prejudice on the part of certain pure-blood families. Some of them have a very low view of Muggle-borns. Sorry, Luella, but you need to be aware of this," she said apologetically as Luella's eyes flared in anger.

"There's nothing wrong with having Muggle parents!" Luella snapped.

"Yes, well, you know that and I know that," said Caitlin gently. "My father was a Muggle too, although he died when I was quite young. But there are others who don't, and you may find yourself with a bit to prove. I hasten to add though that they're in the minority. Even in Slytherin."

Luella subsided, although a spark of anger still remained. Marlie Lovegood's subtle sense of superiority was at least partially explained - one mage parent was obviously better than none at all.

"And this git was your House Founder," Luella said softly. The prospectus hadn't mentioned that, funnily enough.

Caitlin looked deep in thought, as if she'd been expecting that particular response. When she did speak, it was slowly. "He's still our Founder, Luella. Whether you agree with him or not, you'll have to come to terms with that somehow. Now, I personally think you have to view Salazar's ideas in the context of the times," she said by way of explanation. "He lived during a time when Muggles were very hostile to the idea of magic and we had to keep a low profile. I think he saw Muggle children as a threat to security. Either that, or he'd seen too many close friends die after being lynched by Muggles to ever really trust them. Also, you haven't seen the way they lived at the time. I suppose they teach you in your history lessons about how people lived in the Middle Ages?"

Luella and Deanna both nodded, grimacing.

"It sounded pretty revolting," said Luella. "All those nasty diseases, and no decent toilets."

"Precisely," Caitlin smiled thinly. "And if it sounds horrible to you, think how a mage coming from a community where you had magical privies that made the waste disappear, mud resistant robes, cures for most diseases known to the Muggles, a non-existent infant mortality rate, nice clean stone buildings for everyone, house elves that kept everything sanitary using magic and a standard of living not far off what you're both used to, would think. I'm telling you, the phrase 'filthy Muggles' wasn't abuse back then, it was a fact. Of course the mages of the day felt they were superior - why wouldn't they? The poorest mage lived better than a Muggle king. Salazar was only different in that his attitudes were more extreme and professed more openly. He wasn't interested in saving Muggles from themselves, and he certainly didn't want their children around, with their insistence in only one god, and eternal damnation for those who didn't follow him, and that magic users not sanctioned by their High Priest in Rome were going straight to Hell. Actually can't say I entirely blame him on that score," she said with a grin.

Luella had to admit that being told that your magic was evil on a daily basis would probably annoy even the most patient of mages.

"But that doesn't mean being a Muggle-born makes you inferior!" she responded.

"Well, of course not," Caitlin replied. "Times have changed, and so have Muggles. Most love the idea of magic. That weird Middle Eastern crucifixion cult has lost its

hold on their minds. And perhaps most importantly, they've discovered science, and it's given them power equal to ours in a way. No, Luella, in no way do I think Muggles are inferior. But back then, Salazar had some good points, and a lot of mages agreed with him, up until the point where he started secretly advocating the extermination of Muggle-borns, and the banning of mage-Muggle marriages, or at least severely restricting them to suitable candidates. That was when he crossed the line, and that's when war broke out, and Salazar got thrown out of Hogwarts. Battles were fought, alliances were made and broken, and a particularly nasty bloodfeud ensued that endures to this day. Salazar, I might add, lost, although his House stayed. Enough of them repented or stayed loyal to make it worthwhile keeping it. After all, Salazar Slytherin was still a Founder. But from then on, Slytherin House was seen as different, marked out by its past. At best, a house to be wary of, at worst the source of everything evil. Dark mages from Gryffindor, Ravenclaw and Hufflepuff are overlooked or explained away as having had a traumatic past. Dark Slytherins have always been blown up into terrifying figures of absolute evil. Their Dark Mages are seen as one-offs, aberrations. Ours are seen as typical Slytherins. Until the 1970's, we Slytherins have always put up with the prejudice and just got on with our lives. We dealt with it by consoling ourselves that our house may be evil but at least we were the talented ones. That's why we're noted for our ambition: we start out automatically disadvantaged and work twice as hard to catch up. We've all got something to prove. We've been hated but we get by. All that changed when Voldemort emerged onto the scene. Not many people know this, but he was a Slytherin at school."

Deanna's jaw dropped. "Voldemort went to Hogwarts??"

"Who's Voldemort?" asked Luella. The name meant nothing to her.

"Of course he did, where else would he have gone?" Caitlin said impatiently. "And don't say Durmstrang."

"It's a magical school up near the Arctic," Deanna informed her. "Mum reckons it teaches people the Dark Arts."

"It does teach them, Deanna, Albus Dumbledore himself confirmed it to me," said Caitlin, clearly not happy. "Likely to create a lot of work for us in the future. After all, Dark mages don't just turn up from nowhere, they need educating too. But that's beside the point. To answer your question, Luella, Lord Voldemort, as he liked to call himself - it wasn't his real name - was the most evil wizard these isles have ever known. He didn't just study the Dark Arts, he used them. He was after nothing less than world domination, and he was prepared to use any means to get it. For eleven years, he held magical society in his grip, he and his followers hunting and killing any who opposed them, and occasionally just doing it for fun. He was pure evil." She paused, the memories clearly causing her pain. "I faced him twice, and barely escaped with my life each time. Both times, it was by sheer luck that I survived. Just as it was sheer luck that eventually brought him down." She stopped speaking, staring into the distance, eyes glistening. Luella sat next her, digesting all this. This must have been the war that she was lucky to have missed. Now she could see what Caitlin meant. She looked at the witch with new respect. All these years she'd simply seen her as Deanna's mother, who in her working life happened to be known as Detective Inspector Tyler, plain clothes policewoman. And now it turned out she'd faced the

most dangerous wizard ever, not once but twice, and survived. Luella was most impressed. One thing was certain, she'd never take Caitlin Tyler for granted ever again.

Caitlin seemed to recover herself, and was continuing.

"Anyway, Voldemort was a Slytherin, and although it wasn't widely known for sure, most suspected. He also drew most of his followers from Slytherin House, although by no means all. However, it was enough for most mages to have their worst suspicions about us proved. Also, for the first time in our long history, Slytherins themselves began to believe that they were intrinsically evil. I've had friends killed by Voldemort and his followers, but I've also seen people I thought were friends go over to his side and do the most awful things. And that is something that all the Slytherins who didn't support him have had to live with ever since. We, more than most, have had to face what our house is capable of."

Deanna clearly was having trouble believing all this. "Slytherin the evil house... Voldemort one of you... His followers mainly Slytherin..." She looked up with a start. "How come you never said this before, Mum? You always said how much fun you had at school!"

Caitlin smiled grimly. "So I did. And I don't regret being in Slytherin for one moment. Slytherin is not an intrinsically evil house. Make no mistake, evil's not unique to us. And some of the finest mages I've ever known are or were Slytherin. But we have produced more dark mages than the other three put together, and they fear us. Rightly, sometimes. All that fear and hate directed at us... Slytherins are driven people anyway. We work hard, but not in the same way as Hufflepuffs, who work because that is what is required of them. We work hard at what we do because we need to prove ourselves. Salazar originally selected those who, once committed to achieving an end, would not stop until they had done it. He did that, I believe, because he knew the magical community would have to retreat and separate from the Muggle community shortly, and he wanted the committed achievers near him. He wanted those who had what it took to withstand the pressure in the long haul. In later years, that has become devalued to mean power-hungry Machiavellian social climbers, who simply crave material success. But the original spirit of Slytherin goes far beyond that. It embraces all who want something more from their lives, who want to be the best they can be and aren't afraid to work to get it. Slytherin goes to extremes far more than most houses. Its best members are often far better, more powerful, more heroic, than most. Its bad ones are truly evil. I assure you, you will find very few average Slytherins. It is for this reason we are so feared. Our good people are envied and held in awe. Our bad ones loathed. None really get respect though. Slytherin power is feared. This leaves Slytherins desperate to prove themselves as worthy of respect. However, it's always harder to draw good feelings than bad. In the end, many of them decide that if they can't be a great good mage, they'll be the best bad guy ever. Which only contributes to our dark reputation, which puts us under more pressure to prove ourselves, which creates more dark mages. It's a vicious circle."

Luella was trying to digest all this. "What does all this have to do with me?" she faltered.

"I'm getting to that," said Caitlin. "There are lots of legends regarding our house, but one of the few that is actually positive concerns the Redemption of Slytherin."

"The Redemption? What's that?" Deanna, on hearing that there was actually a positive legend out there, had perked up immediately.

"It's a prophecy Salazar Slytherin's daughter Morgan made after Slytherin was thrown out of Hogwarts by Godric Gryffindor. She was a seer of some repute and after her father's expulsion, prophesied that the name of Slytherin would be shrouded in darkness for the next thousand years, until two Muggle children would be born and enter Slytherin House. They would be the Heirs of Slytherin and both would bring it greatness. They would be noticed by the following sign - that the first touch of their wand would cause the Slytherin Serpent to rise from it. The first, and I quote, 'Shall come [as] the Destroyer, laying waste to the world.' Then, fifty years later, there shall come 'as a magical flower on a Muggle tree, which yet has roots in magic deep' a girl child, Slytherin's Redeemer, who shall lead all back to the light, unite the warring serpents and bring peace and a new beginning." Caitlin paused and looked at Luella directly.

"The identity of the first child isn't known for certain, but there's a lot of apocryphal evidence that it was Voldemort. That was one reason why so many Slytherins flocked to him - they believed him to be the one who would make Slytherin a name to be proud of again. Unfortunately, they forgot that there would be two children. They also forgot that there are many different kinds of greatness. Voldemort would have put Slytherin on top, but there would have been no peace, no reconciliation, no true redemption. It was the second child's job to bring that about, but Voldemort's propagandists ignored that part of the prophecy."

Luella was growing increasingly uncomfortable. "What part of the prophecy? What does the second child do?"

Caitlin smiled indulgently. After all, it was a lot to take in. "I believe I just told you. She will come as a Redeemer, a healer, one who'll unite us all and rise against Lord Voldemort. She'll be the one to bring true peace and a new beginning. It'll be her who makes peace with our rival house, Gryffindor. At the same time, a warrior wizard, a son of Gryffindor and Slytherin, will emerge from the House of Godric. And the two of them shall bring about a new beginning."

"And that child is me," Luella whispered, feeling her world shatter. No, she wanted to scream, it isn't me, you made a mistake! Yet at the same time, she could feel a sensation inside her, a burning sensation that was shooting up her spine, screaming that yes, this was her destiny, the role she'd been born for. And at the base of her spine, coiled like a serpent that was only just beginning to lift its head and wake, she could feel what could only be described as power.

"Yes, Luella," Caitlin answered softly. "That child is you."

However, the moment did not last. Deanna was having none of this.

"But Voldemort's already been defeated," she pointed out. "He lost all his power in 1981 after attacking Harry Potter, surely?"

"Well, yes, he did," Caitlin admitted. "He lost his power and his physical body that night. But we don't know if he actually died. Knowing how Voldemort operates, I'm sure he didn't. Melissa doesn't think so either, which is why she reacted the way she did today."

"But why?" Luella asked, perplexed. "If I'm the Redeemer, then surely that's a good thing? I mean, she's a Slytherin, after all."

Caitlin shook her head. "Good for her, maybe! Not good for all Slytherins! You're forgetting, Luella. A lot of Slytherins voluntarily supported Voldemort. A lot of them did rather well out of his reign. A lot of them don't **want** to be redeemed! They're quite happy being evil! And if someone were to come along whose destiny would be to change all that..." She let them work out the implications for themselves.

"They'd kill me if they knew," Luella whispered. Any jubilation she might have felt disappeared. It was real. Not heroic. Not glorious. Just very, very dangerous and likely to get worse. She turned to Caitlin, desperate for reassurance. "Help me!" she begged.

Caitlin didn't disappoint. She gently squeezed the terrified youngster's hand, seeming to radiate reassurance. As Luella looked into the older witch's eyes, she could almost feel a voice whispering in her mind that she wasn't to worry, everything was going to be fine. "I will," she said gently. "You have my word. Whatever I can do to help you, I will do. I'm an Auror, I'm deputy head of the biggest department in the Ministry, and I've got considerable powers beyond that. Believe me, Luella, you're not alone. And you will only get more powerful as the years go by. For make no mistake, we are talking about years here. It will be a long time before the fight comes to your door, if indeed it ever does." She sat up, businesslike suddenly. "But we mustn't sit back and wait for it. We need to get ready. And the first thing to do is make sure of our advantage. Which is, Deanna?" She spun round to face her daughter, clearly testing her.

"Er..." Deanna seemed to be at a loss, evidently not having expected this. However, she rallied her wits and soon guessed the answer. "No one outside this room apart from Auntie Mel and Marlie knows about Lu?" she volunteered.

"Precisely," Caitlin smiled. "Now, I don't know what Mel is planning, although I daresay she'll tell me. I also cannot vouch for Marlie, although I strongly suspect that she is being threatened with being forced to wear her mother's old clothes and nothing else until school starts if she breathes a word to anyone."

Luella frowned. "That doesn't sound too bad," she said, confused. Certainly not bad enough to deter Marlie from blabbing.

"You don't know Marlie," said Deanna.

"You've not seen Mel's old clothes," grinned Caitlin. "But I digress. As Deanna said, our advantage is that no one will know you're anything other than an ordinary Muggle-born witch when you start school. And it has to stay that way, Luella, for your own safety. No one must know about what happened this afternoon. No one. Is that clear, both of you?"

"Yes, Mum," Deanna promised instantly.

Luella nodded. "No problem." No way was she telling anyone about this. It sounded like she could have enough problems what with being a Muggle-born, never mind being a future superhero. No, until these alleged super powers and destiny started making themselves known, she was keeping silent.

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The next day, Luella decided to tackle Deanna. *I need to know*, she thought. *Need to know if she'll help me or run.*

She was surprised to find that the Tylers' front door opened before she even had the chance to knock. The hallway, however, was empty.

"Um, hello?" she asked hesitantly. This was creeping her out. "Hello?" she called, stepping inside.

Behind her the door swung shut, the click of the lock fastening sounding horrifically loud in the silence. Luella flinched, before trying to calm herself down. *Quiet you, this is the Tyler house, you've been here often enough.*

"Mrs. Tyler?" she called out, not knowing if Caitlin was at work or not. Her shifts meant she was often in during office hours and who knew where at night. No response though. She must be at work.

"Deanna?" Luella called. Her friend had to be in, surely? "Deanna?" she called again, an edge of hysteria in her voice.

"In here, Lu," a voice answered from the kitchen. Luella sagged with relief. Deanna was in after all. Feeling a little better, Luella went in to find her.

Deanna was sitting at the workbench, a mug of tea before her. Luella's relief died as she saw her. Deanna was staring at a crack in the lino, clearly troubled. She nodded briefly at Luella as she came in, but the smile was a weak one.

"Hey."

"Hey," said Luella nervously. She glanced around. "Your mum not in?"

"At work," said Deanna shortly. "So. The house let you in by itself, did it?"

Luella nodded. "Yeah. Didn't even have to knock. Freaky, eh?"

"Yeah," Deanna laughed. "Really freaky. To think, all these years you were just the Muggle kid next door, and now you're one of us."

Somehow, Luella did not think Deanna was referring to her being a witch.

"What's the matter, Deanna? Can't handle me being a powerful heiress?" she asked, a little more sharply than she'd intended. Caitlin's remarks on how Muggle-borns were thought of had got to her.

"No, not especially, in fact I'm glad you're my equal," Deanna shot back. "You're not the only Slytherin heiress in this room."

Luella raised an eyebrow. Deanna didn't look like anything other than a normal girl, and her house, despite the general witchiness, was not that of a great family. But then again, Caitlin had said she was from an old family, and then there was that Gringotts vault.

"Another one?" was all she said. "Salazar got around a bit, didn't he? Are there any more I should know about, or is it just the two of us?"

Deanna burst out laughing, shattering the awkward moment. "Lu, you idiot," she spluttered. "Come on, come and sit down. I'll give you a very quick history lesson, so far as I know it."

"Make it quick," Luella warned. "Or if not quick, interesting." Although a bright girl, long lectures bored her to tears.

"I'll try," Deanna grinned. "Basically, Salazar Slytherin married twice. First marriage ended badly, but did result in Morgan. Second marriage was to some blonde tart, and resulted in another daughter."

"Ancestor of yours?" asked Luella with a smile.

Deanna blinked in shock. "Ancestor of mine? Luella Martin, wash your mouth out. No, that daughter went on to found another family entirely. I'm descended from Morgan."

"What?" Luella demanded, piqued. "I thought I was meant to be the Heir of Slytherin."

"And so you are," Deanna soothed her. "It's just you're not the only one. Listen, Morgan had three kids. A son, called Maredudd, and twin daughters, Ninianne and Nimue. Maredudd ap Morgan founded the magical family of Morgan, a former Allied Clan of ours. Most of them got killed during the witch hunts, but a few survived. Ninianne, as the eldest girl, was Morgan's Heiress, and I'm descended from her."

"The eldest girl?" Luella looked at her very sceptically. "Wasn't the eldest son meant to inherit?"

"Matrilineal families are a wonderful thing," Deanna told her. She noticed the blank look on Luella's face and explained with a smile. "Means the women pass on the inheritance. Eldest daughter is in charge, passes everything on to her eldest daughter and so on."

"What a weird idea," said Luella.

"Not really. You're just used to it the other way around," Deanna pointed out. "It's to make sure it all stays within the family - after all, you always know who a child's mother is." Deanna's face darkened. "You never get kids with 'Mother: unknown' on their birth certificate." Deanna had never known her father. According to her mother, he'd died when she was too young to remember. However, that didn't really explain why her mother had told her virtually nothing about him, and the lack of knowledge rankled. Deanna didn't like to pry, though, and just assumed her mother found it too painful to talk about. She would have liked to know more, but it wasn't a big deal. Being part of a matrilinear dynasty certainly helped there.

"Anyway," she continued. "Ninianne's my ancestor. And Nimue, the youngest, well, she's yours."

"Mine?" Luella sat there, disbelieving. "No way. How on earth do you know that?"

Deanna merely sighed. "More explaining. Oh joy. Look, you already know that Muggle kids can develop magical powers, right?"

Luella nodded. Oh boy, did she ever know that.

"Well, that happens quite a bit, and that's fine and good and right. However, what isn't so grand is when the reverse happens."

"A mage's child with no magic?" Luella guessed.

"Got it one. It doesn't happen often, but when it does, it's pretty devastating. They're called Squibs. And they don't have the best lives."

"I can imagine," Luella said softly. It was one thing growing up Muggle and suddenly finding out you were a witch. But to grow up thinking you had the power of a witch and then discovering you weren't, that you had to either make your way as a misfit in a society dominated by something you could never have, or go and live as a Muggle in a society you knew nothing about... that had to be the worst thing imaginable.

"You get it then. Good," said Deanna. "Because your ancestor Nimue was one."

"What? No way," said Luella scornfully. "How could a powerful seeress have a Squib child?"

"Inbreeding, probably," said Deanna. "Too many purebloods only marrying other purebloods. Does dilute the gene pool. But I digress. Nimue was a Squib, and she lived her life as a Muggle. It wasn't easy for her, but they got her apprenticed to a sympathetic pub landlady, and she made a career for herself as a publican. Married a

Muggle, and died leaving behind seven pubs and five children, all of whom were also Muggles."

"And I'm descended from one of them," said Luella.

"Mum thinks so," said Deanna confidently. "She was telling me about it last night, bits of it anyway. I don't think she told me everything, but what she did tell me seemed to make sense."

Luella tried to digest all this. "Wow," was all she could manage.

"Yeah," said Deanna softly. "Impressive, huh?"

Luella nodded. "I'll say. Two days ago, I'm just a normal kid, who happens to be a witch, now I'm the long lost descendant of a major magical family, with a destiny to fulfil." She looked up at Deanna, remembering why she'd come over. "Deanna, I'm scared."

Deanna hesitated, before reaching out and taking Luella's hand. "So am I," she said softly. "But we'll get through this. I promise you."

"Thanks," Luella whispered, starting to smile. It was what she'd been hoping for, the reassurance that Deanna wouldn't go running off in the other direction, wouldn't abandon her. "We're still best mates, right?"

"A lot more than that, Lu," said Deanna, still holding her hand. "You and I... we're family, Lu. Family."

Family? It dawned on her. Of course. Ninianne and Nimue had been sisters... twins. Which meant that as their respective descendants, they were related.

"Yeah," she said, unsure whether to laugh or cry. "Yeah, I guess we are."

"How'd you feel about that?" Deanna asked, eyes burning with a strange eagerness. "You know, being related to me. OK with having Mum and me for relatives?"

"I can handle it," Luella smiled. "If you promise to help me. Teach me what you know, protect me when I need it, and when I call on you for help, be there for me."

"You have my word," Deanna replied, eyes never leaving Luella's own. "Lu Martin, you have my word."

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It was with trepidation that Caitlin arrived at work that morning. Melissa was rota'd in that day, and probably the first thing she'd do would be to call a meeting on Luella. Great. Dealing with two impressionable young eleven year olds was one thing, explaining things to the head mages of the DDAE was quite another. She really wasn't in the mood to discuss her family history with her workmates.

"Hi, hon!" called Jeremy Abbott, Caitlin's outrageously gay and perennially chirpy PA, as Caitlin arrived at her office.

"Hello yourself," Caitlin purred, brushing her hair back. He was the only man in the department entirely immune to her charms, which is why she never missed the opportunity to use them on him. "How's my favourite boy?"

"Oh, so-so, so-so, darling. How've you been, my dear? You look ravishing, as usual. Is that nail varnish new?" He indicated Caitlin's nails, painted in sparkling deep purple.

"New-ish," grinned Caitlin. "Aphrodite's Blood Nail Varnish, by Medea Nightshade."

Jeremy went into paroxysms of ecstasy. "Oh, I *love* her products! I must get some myself."

"Erzulie Bellina's Hall of Beauty's just ordered some in," Caitlin grinned. "If you're very, very good, I might take you there, get you a make-over done."

Jeremy squealed with delight. "Ooh! How simply delightful! I could do with one too - my cuticles are simply dreadful."

"You poor baby," Caitlin soothed. "It must be awful for you." She changed the subject. Best to get the bad news over with. "So, honey-pie, any messages for me? Or can I get straight on to organising that raid on the Malfoys?"

Jeremy went through his Inbox. "Not a thing, pumpkin. Looks like you can get on with trying to arrest that delectable specimen Lucius Malfoy." He edged nearer, the air of a conspirator about him. "Caitlin, lovey, if you ever *do* manage to get him in here, could you put in a good word for me? He is a total Adonis."

Caitlin rolled her eyes. "Jeremy, he's a Dark wizard! Alleged ex-L. V. supporter. Not to mention married and apparently straight."

"Not when I'm through, he won't be," said Jeremy lasciviously. "You know, sweetie, I'm sure it's really that slutty wife of his that's into all the Dark magic. He's probably just covering for her. If you put her away, he'll probably turn out to be a big ol' pussycat." He leaned closer, lowering his voice. "My ex-boyfriend Ronan Finnegan does her hair, you know." He glanced around, voice now a whisper. "Terrible split ends!" he hissed.

Caitlin smothered a giggle. Although she had the luxury of her own office, Jeremy's desk was at the end of an open-plan office where all the support staff worked, and she didn't want to look unprofessional. However, the thought of Narcissa Malfoy having split ends was enough to put a smile on anyone's face.

"I'll have a look myself when we do the raid- sorry, *inspection*." Complaints about the department's methods had resulted in some more user-friendly policies. However, Caitlin was a traditionalist at heart, and believed that the old ways had a lot going for them. "Anyway, I'll go and prepare for that. Let me know if anyone calls, won't you?"

"I will," Jeremy called back as Caitlin headed for her own office. "Are you in or out?"

"Out to everyone but Mel!" Caitlin grinned, before unlocking her office door and preparing to head in.

She had almost made it to the safety of her own desk when the intercom on Jeremy's desk sprang to life. It had originally been a brass owl, but a little Transfiguration and several lavish Colouring Charms on Jeremy's part, and it now had the shape of a large pink and red bird of paradise.

"Is that you, Caitlin?" it called out in Melissa Lovegood's voice.

Caitlin swore under her breath. "Yes, it's me," she sighed, turning back. This was going to be one of those days.

"Excellent," the bird answered briskly. "Come to my office, we're having a meeting. You know what it's about."

Caitlin groaned. Judgement Day had arrived. "I'll be there," she sighed, offloading her bag and slinging it inside her office before locking the door again.

Jeremy was looking at her sympathetically. "Tough morning, huh?"

Caitlin nodded wearily. "Like you wouldn't believe."

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Quite a few of her colleagues were already there. Caitlin's heart sank as she took her seat. All the seats were now filled, with her arrival. All of the major players in the department were there. They were also almost all former Slytherins, proving the old adage that the best gamekeepers were reformed poachers. Carmela Lynch, Head of Magical Forensics. Denethor Macnair, the white sheep of his family and Head of the Enforcers, the mages responsible for carrying out sentences. Arwen Summerisle, Head of the Department of Mysteries, which the DDAE had controlled for the past four years. Edmund Blackadder, a Squib born to Slytherin parents and Head of Muggle Affairs, the Department's Fixer and Procurer and the one to see if you needed Muggle transport, a fake passport, a cover-up of a raid or confrontation that got out of hand or anything similar. Marcus Vetinari, the fearsome Chief Prosecutor and Attorney General. And of course, Melissa Lovegood herself, Head of Department, creator and maintainer of one of the most extensive intelligence networks anywhere, and rumoured to be capable of manipulating events around the globe.

"Afternoon, Caitlin," Melissa greeted her. The others in the room looked away, all slightly amused, although they didn't meet her eyes. Marcus was the only one brave enough to smirk openly.

"Sorry I'm late," said Caitlin, hunting around for a good excuse. She opted for a veiled version of the truth. "Something unexpected came up yesterday, and I was up rather late sorting it all out."

Melissa nodded, guessing what she was referring to. "You as well? Thought you might." She turned to address the others. "Handy that the topic came up really. Something unexpected certainly has come up. Hence the emergency meeting and the need for absolute secrecy."

A murmur ran amongst the collected mages. Caitlin could only squirm, hoping that she wasn't called on to contribute more information that was strictly necessary to this meeting.

Marcus Vetinari laughed scornfully. "Absolute secrecy? Melissa, it's always absolute secrecy with you. You start panicking over security breaches if someone finds out what you had for breakfast this morning."

Melissa was ready for him. "Marcus, if someone had your house under enough surveillance to know that, you'd be the first to complain. Incidentally, it was two croissants, one with strawberry jam, one with honey, a bowl of Muggle cereal called Crunchy Nut Cornflakes, and a glass of orange juice."

Marcus stared at her in shock, before swiftly recovering and scowling at her. Everyone else was looking very impressed. Melissa smiled and continued.

"You eat the same thing every morning. Your eldest daughter, who is on the same Quidditch team as my son, described the procedure in great detail last time she visited us. Which gives us three lessons. Lesson one: never be too predictable. Lesson two: always keep your eyes and ears open - information can come from surprising sources. And most important of all, lesson three: for Mercury's sake, keep an eye on your kids."

This last was met with laughter from all of them, except Marcus. Those with children of their own laughed loudest.

"Ah yes," said Melissa quietly. "Children. The next generation. Our hope for the future, and yet, who does not fear what they might do with it? What they might make us endure in our old age, when we're too weak to stop them?"

"Jupiter save us, she's having a midlife crisis," Marcus muttered. Melissa ignored him.

"It is one such child that concerns me today. Who here knows the legend of the Slytherin Redeemer?"

That had them. Not a one had expected that to come up. Not one, save Caitlin.

There was silence. Then a quiet, feminine voice spoke up.

"I know of it." It was Arwen Summerisle, daughter of a prominent, if reclusive, Slytherin-Hufflepuff family, and something of an expert on ancient and little-known lore.

"I know it," said Denethor Macnair coldly. "But I don't think that Death Eater propaganda really has a place in determining policy, do you?"

"The original isn't pro-Death Eater." Edmund Blackadder might be a Squib, but his family had an extensive library, and he made it his business to know anything that might be important. Denied power one way, he was determined to get it another.

"In fact, the original is quite the reverse. I'll quote it for you.

*A millennium of darkness on Slytherin's get,
As all our good deeds you'll forget,
And war shall be the Serpents' fate.*

*From Muggle and womb of a serpent girl,
Shall come the Destroyer, laying waste to the world.
As Heir of Slytherin he shall be known."*

"We all know the legend," Marcus Vetinari interrupted, dispersing the sense of awe that had descended on the room. "We remember what happened when one came among us claiming to be the one who would bring Slytherin greatness! We remember the Muggles killed, the mages raped and murdered, the families torn apart, the lives ruined!" He was staring at Melissa in hatred. "He's been dead eleven years, Melissa. Why resurrect the past now?"

"Because if we don't, it will resurrect itself!" Melissa snarled. "Edmund, the rest of the prophecy, if you please."

Edmund nodded and continued.

*"Then shall come delivery,
As a magical flower on a Muggle tree,
Which yet has roots in magic deep.*

*The Redeemer of Slytherin shall she be.
Yet to achieve her destiny,
A warrior wizard will she need.*

*Of Gryffindor and Slytherin conjoined,
Yet tending towards Godric's side.
He will aid her all the while.*

*They will cause the Dark Lord's fall.
They will bring them, one and all.
At the last, the war will end,
And warring serpents once more be friends.*

And by this sign shall ye know them - when they first lay hands upon their wands, the Serpent of Slytherin shall rise and strike fear into the hearts of all who witness it. And they shall each bear their destiny on their arms as a Mark, never to fade until their fate is complete." He sat back, folding his arms with a smirk of satisfaction.

Carmela Lynch applauded him, impressed. "Ooh, well done, you remembered it all word-perfect! I couldn't have managed it."

"Yes, well, remembering fair words is one thing," Marcus stated coldly. He'd never liked the Squib, and not even Melissa's fondness for the man kept him from letting his dislike show now and then. "Remembering foul deeds is quite another. The last time any among us paraded that prophecy around, our world was nearly destroyed, and only pure chance saved us. There is little to be gained by bringing it up again."

"Not pure chance," Caitlin said softly. She'd remained silent up until now. However, her instincts were telling her it was time to intervene. Melissa was looking a little beleaguered, and she was the only one in the Department who Marcus Vetinari was truly intimidated by.

The lawyer broke off, glancing at her. "Why, what do you have to add, Tyler?" He never used her first name. Always Tyler, or Auror Tyler. One more way of keeping everything formal, everyone in their proper place. It suited her just fine.

"Merely that it wasn't coincidence that the night he fell was the night he finally made an open move against Medea Tyler," Caitlin said neutrally. "She may not have survived, but he never returned either. Call it chance if you will. Indeed, chance it may have been, who knows. I wasn't there when he killed her, and she never told me all her secrets. But I still believe that the Fates were directing that night."

Melissa seized the opportunity to take control while Marcus was distracted. "And the Fates are weaving our destinies yet," she said, getting to her feet with a sweeping motion. "The thousand years are up. The second child lives, and is starting Hogwarts this year."

Silence. The sound of a falling pin would have rung out in the moments that followed.

Then everyone started talking at once.

"Preposterous," scoffed Marcus.

"It cannot be!" cried Carmela.

"Is this some kind of joke?" Denethor demanded.

"But it's just a legend," Edmund whispered.

"All the legends walked on this earth at some point," Arwen said quietly.

"And this one walks now," said Melissa firmly, cutting through the babble. "She's here. She's alive. She's a young Muggle-born who knows nothing about what's about to befall her. And she starts Hogwarts this year."

The room fell silent. No one said a word. Until Caitlin spoke up.

"Er... Actually Mel, that's not **strictly** true."

Melissa sighed wearily. "Oh for gods' sake. Caitlin, how much have you told her?"

"Um... everything?" Caitlin shrank back, preparing herself for the tirade that was almost certainly heading in her direction. Melissa's management style was more Sherlock Holmes than Brian Clough, but all the same it never paid to underestimate her.

"Caitlin!" Melissa cried, exasperated. "I was hoping you'd erase her memory or something, or make up an excuse. I didn't want her to know until she was older."

"Hold on, you mean to say you knew about this?" Marcus demanded. "Why didn't you inform us sooner?"

"Marcus, shut up, I only found out yesterday myself," Caitlin snarled at him, causing the lawyer to edge away from her. She turned back to Melissa. "Look, I had to tell her something. She had to know sooner or later, and I felt it best if I did it then, save her worrying needlessly. Besides, she's a friend of my daughter, who was also there at the time, and I'm not playing about with my own's child's memory, thank you very much."

"Ah well, it can't be helped," Melissa sighed. "Suppose you're right, she had to know eventually. She won't go telling all her friends, will she?"

Caitlin shook her head. "No. Her only really close friend is my daughter, and seeing as they both already know, that's safe enough. I've told them both to tell no one, I think they'll be discreet."

"What about her parents? Do they know?" Melissa asked.

"No."

"Good. Keep it that way," she answered. "They're Muggles. They might not take it well."

"But are you sure it's her?" asked Edmund. "You could be mistaken." Carmela nodded eagerly. Clearly she too was not happy about the rise of the Redeemer of Slytherin either.

"Yes, I'm sure," said Melissa. "I have seen her. I was there when it happened. I saw the serpent rise from her wand with my own eyes. Caitlin saw it too, didn't you?"

Caitlin lowered her eyes. "It's true. When she touched her wand, she made the Slytherin Serpent rise from it, without any intention of doing so, I'm sure. I know this girl, I saw her grow up, she doesn't know the first thing about magic or our world. She couldn't have done that consciously, and in any case, she hates being the centre of attention. I don't want to believe that the Redeemer is here, now, in our time, and that she is a girl I have seen grow up, but I can't deny it. Melissa speaks the truth."

Worried glances were exchanged. For both Melissa and Caitlin to be so certain was not good news.

Carmela Lynch laughed just a little too loudly. "But, for the Redeemer to do her job, she's got to defeat You-Know-Who, right?"

Melissa nodded, but said nothing, silently daring her to tease out the implications.

"But... You-Know-Who's dead, isn't he?" she stammered. "He lost his body and all his power when he attacked the Potters. So how can the Redeemer kill him again?"

Arwen spoke up. "Melissa, there's been no evidence of any organised Death Eater activity or any sign of You-Know-Who ever since. We'd have some warning if he was returning surely?"

"We'd hope to have," replied Melissa. "But You-Know-Who is a tricky customer indeed, and would do his best to keep hidden. And you all know that although he has no body and no power, he is probably still alive in some form or other. Which is why we have to be vigilant at all times."

"Your point being?" Vetinari asked dryly.

"Meaning that the presence of the Redeemer indicates that it's highly likely You-Know-Who will rise again one day. Not immediately, I have no fears on that score. But we must be ever more watchful. We must also take steps to ensure that the Redeemer is safe. If You-Know-Who does return, we need her alive and well to fight him."

"She'll be safe at Hogwarts, though?" Caitlin asked.

Melissa sighed. "Yes, I think Albus Dumbledore will be more than enough protection. But the Redeemer needs more protection than most. She is not a normal student. She is the hope of Slytherin, and if You-Know-Who does come back, the hope of all mages, and the Muggles too."

Denethor looked non-plussed. "So can't you just owl Dumbledore and tell him what he has in his school?"

Melissa pondered this. "Maybe," she answered. "But I wanted to keep her identity secret if possible. If we tell Dumbledore, he might feel obliged to inform the rest of the staff, or act in other ways that might mark her out as special. I don't want anyone knowing she's anything other than a normal girl. If I suddenly seek out the Headmaster of Hogwarts, it might draw unwarranted attention. However, someone at the school needs to know. If there's problems, she'll need an adult contact on hand. What I was thinking is to inform the Head of Slytherin, bring him in."

Marcus shot to his feet. "Melissa, you can't. Do you know who he is? What he is?"

Melissa stared him out. "Of course. I've known him all my life."

"But he's a Death Eater!"

"No, he is not. He was arrested, but never charged. Professor Dumbledore himself has vouched for him." Melissa looked tired, but her voice remained calm.

"He's been wrong about his staff before," Carmela spoke up. "Lycanthra LeStrange is in Azkaban, don't forget."

"Maybe," Melissa fired back. "But Severus Snape isn't."

"Melissa," Arwen put in gently, "are you sure your longstanding friendship isn't prejudicing you about him? We only have Dumbledore's word that he was a spy, and we've got a whole file of evidence proving that he was an active Death Eater for four years, and a more passive one for another four. Are you sure he can be trusted?"

"I'm sure," said Melissa firmly. "He turned himself in while You-Know-Who was at the peak of his power, and the information we got out of him proved, on the whole, reliable. We'd have been overrun by 1978 if it hadn't been for him."

Caitlin had remained silent throughout. She too knew Snape well. Too well. Her feelings about him were far from pleasant, and the thought of having him involved, of possibly having to work with him, made her skin crawl. But then again, he was Head of Slytherin, he did need to know, and seeing as he'd be teaching her daughter, she might have to see him anyway. Like it or not, he already was involved. The question really was, could he be trusted?

Her head said no. He'd betrayed both sides in the last war, over and over again. He'd been a spy, a double agent. Did he even have any loyalties any more? Did he even know what loyalty was? And yet, when she opened her mouth to speak, her own lips betrayed her.

"Bring him in," she found herself saying. "We need him."

Where had that come from? she wondered. Still, too late now. Melissa was looking relieved, Marcus annoyed, Denethor nodding calmly, presumably in approval, Edmund and Carmela surprised, and Arwen looking her over, evidently intrigued.

"Thank you, Caitlin," said Melissa gratefully. "Now, if Caitlin Tyler who actually had first-hand Death Eater experience during the war thinks that he's OK, how about we give him the benefit of the doubt? Hmm? Marcus?" She turned on the lawyer, who glared at her. However, as it was well known that he'd spent most of the war behind a desk, he didn't really have a leg to stand on.

Melissa looked around. None of the others appeared to object. "Excellent," she breathed. "Glad that's sorted out. Right, here's what we'll do. First of all, no one here is to speak of this to anyone outside of this room. That includes colleagues, underlings, friends, family, spouses, anyone. Whether they were Slytherins or not. We don't want to alarm anyone, create a panic, or start rumours. We will inform people on a need-to-know basis only. There is no point in overreacting. Are we agreed?"

There was a murmur of assent. Melissa continued. "Secondly, we must make arrangements for the Redeemer's protection. She must be shielded unobtrusively. I

will inform Professor Snape of the situation and request that he keep an eye on her. Seeing as I know him, it'll look far less suspicious to anyone who might happen to get wind of our meeting. They'll think I'm just dropping in on an old friend. Either that, or if they know his past, they'll think it has to do with that. He can keep an eye on the girl, look after her, and no one need be any the wiser." She paused for breath then looked at Caitlin. "Caitlin, you know her family and live near her, I understand." Caitlin nodded. "In that case, I am asking you to keep an eye on her over the holidays. Do not watch her every move, but do keep tabs on her, and be aware of any unusual activities in her vicinity. Caitlin, above all, be discreet. For the Redeemer to succeed, she will need to be strong-minded and morally secure. I think the best way for that to happen is for her to live as normal a life as possible. She can't do this if we intervene too forcibly. Understand me, Caitlin?"

Caitlin nodded. "I'll try my best, Mel."

"Good one. Finally, it remains for all of us to be extra vigilant. We must keep an eye out at all times for any unusual happenings. Anything that could be a sign of You-Know-Who returning, anyone asking any unusual questions regarding Heirs of Slytherin, or looking into ancient prophecies, or Salazar Slytherin's descendants, or anything like that." Melissa's steely gaze bored into all of them. "Get your underlings involved too, although say nothing of why they're looking. Just say that I've decided to tighten up standards. Hint that I am a deluded, paranoid old war veteran if you have to. Although I'm sure you all do that anyway." She grinned. No one dared laugh. Melissa continued. "I shall be giving a speech to the entire department on this particular theme myself later this week. In the meantime, as my old mentor Alastor Moody used to say, **CONSTANT VIGILANCE!**" She thumped the table in an impression of Moody so convincing, it caused them all to jump. Alastor "Mad-Eye" Moody had been what is delicately referred to as a "character".

Melissa looked around inquiringly. "Does anyone have any questions?" There were none. "Good. In that case, let's get started."

Caitlin stayed behind as everyone else filed out. She wanted a word with Melissa in private.

Melissa looked up with a smile as she noticed Caitlin waiting. "Thanks, Cait," she said warmly. "Thanks for backing me up. Marcus would have had them thinking I'd gone nuts if he'd had his way."

"Could he make his ambitions any clearer if he tried?" Caitlin grinned.

"He thinks he's cunning, but he's not," Melissa smiled grimly. "Which, by the way, is why I'm Head of Department and he just handles court cases. Whereas he seems to think that because he's the most senior wizard in the department, and older than me on top of that, he should have this desk, not me. And then he'll turn around and claim that I'm only here because my father used to have this job."

"It didn't hurt though, did it?" said Caitlin. Melissa was the first witch ever to hold her position, and also the youngest Department Head that the Ministry of Magic had ever had. This was owed in large measure to the fact Melissa's father, Mandragor Harker,

had once held her job, before he'd been killed by Lord Voldemort and his followers. Although Melissa was more than capable of doing her job, her father's legacy had been a major factor in her getting it in the first place, a mere five years ago. Despite the outward sang-froid, she wasn't as secure as she made out.

"Oh, I never said it wasn't one of the reasons," said Melissa. "I just meant it wasn't the *only* one."

"Well, you have my support any day," said Caitlin with a smile. "Those of us who actually saw fighting must stick together. Don't let the desk-bound weasel get you down."

"I try not to," Melissa smiled.

"As I saw," Caitlin remarked, remembering the way Melissa had shot back the sharp responses to every barb Marcus Vetinari had sent her way. "Which reminds me, I wanted to talk to you about Snape."

Melissa sat down, nodding as if she'd expected this. "I thought you might. Don't tell me you've changed your mind. I hope you've got a workable alternative in mind if you have - Marcus'll never let me live it down if I change things now."

Caitlin shook her hand. "No, it's not that. It's just that... I'm not sure I can handle seeing him yet. I mean, last time I saw him..." Her voice faltered, the memory not one she wanted to even think about let alone talk about.

Fortunately, with Melissa, there was no need. "I know," she said. "I'm not expecting you to yet. For now, he'll report to me, and so will you, and you won't have to see him unless something really important happens, and maybe not even then if I can arrange it otherwise. But Caitlin, I can't guarantee that you'll never meet. Sooner or later, you two are going to have to sort things out. I mean, he'll have access to the school records, as soon as he lays eyes on Deanna, he'll know. And when he finds out, well then, you'll have to deal with it, because I can't guarantee his actions."

"I know," said Caitlin softly. "But if I can keep it at bay for as long as I can, then I will. For Deanna's sake if not mine."

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Later that day, at Hogwarts, Professor Severus Snape was in his small, sparsely furnished room, preparing for the start of term, and planning what he would be teaching that year. He liked this time of year the best. No students meant peace, quiet, no demands on his time, no having to deal with uninspiring and uninspired students who seemed to prefer infringing rules to actually learning anything. That was the downside to teaching, it meant involvement with students, most of whom cared little about anything Potions-related. Once they found out Love Potions were banned at school, they seemed to lose all interest. Even the Slytherins weren't what they used to be. Voldemort had taken all the best ones, it seemed, either killing them or recruiting them. No, the recent crop of Slytherins had seriously declined in quality. They were all so depressingly average. Even the bad ones were no longer master criminals or

calculating plotters, merely bullies and braggarts. And the good ones were so worthy, it was unbelievable. Debra Stormosi was the best of a bad lot. Now she was approaching the model of what a Slytherin should be. If only she was a little less respectable. That was the problem these days, the Slytherins just didn't want to be seen as special anymore.

"Salazar Slytherin, what has your house become?" Severus mused idly to himself, gazing into space.

The sound of the fireplace flaring into life distracted him. Severus turned around with a frown. Who could want to talk to him at the moment? Not one of the parents, surely. Well, if it was, they could go hang. The students weren't his responsibility until September. There were two weeks to go yet.

It turned out to be Albus Dumbledore, Headmaster of Hogwarts.

"Good afternoon, Severus," he said amiably. Severus glared at him. He'd been working for Dumbledore long enough to know that his amiable face was no reliable indicator of what was to come, and it invariably meant trouble.

"Albus," he greeted the other wizard. "Can I help you?" This phrase, translated from Slytherin-speak, meant approximately 'Tell me what you're after and be quick about it, and may the gods help you if I deem you to be wasting my time'.

Albus Dumbledore chuckled. He'd been Severus's employer long enough to become more fluent in Slytherinese than some of the Slytherins.

"Don't worry, Severus, I'm not here to bother you. It's just that I have Melissa Lovegood on the Floo for you, and I was wondering if you wanted to talk to her or not."

Now that was an entirely different proposition.

"Mel?" Severus's demeanour changed in a second. "Well, don't keep the good lady hanging around waiting! She's an important government official. Put her through! Her time is precious."

"As you wish, Severus," Dumbledore smiled. "Do you want to speak to her in person, or is the Floo grate sufficient?"

"In person, if she can," Severus replied.

"I'll see what I can do," Dumbledore answered, his head fading away. Seconds later, Melissa Lovegood's head appeared in its place.

"Severus!" she smiled. "How are you?"

"So far, my dear, it's been a dull, uneventful afternoon, with nothing of any importance occurring whatsoever. In short, heaven. You?"

"Dull, uneventful day?" sighed Melissa. "I used to have them once." She blinked and gazed at him intensely. "Severus, can I come in? This is so impersonal, and I'm not sure about the security of this Floo connection. Anyone on the Hogwarts intragrate could listen in on us."

Severus privately doubted that any of his colleagues would bother, but nevertheless, Dumbledore at least knew this conversation was taking place, and for some reason, anything that so much as hinted at his personal affairs seemed to draw his colleagues like moths to a flame. "Yes, of course you can, my dear. Come through."

The flames leapt up, and the figure of Melissa Lovegood emerged into Severus's underground office. He immediately went to steady her.

"Careful there, it's a little disorientating. Can I get you anything?"

"No thanks, I'll be fine," Melissa replied. She gave him an impish little smile from behind her Gucci glasses. "But you might want to pour yourself a brandy. I think you're going to need it."

Severus narrowed his eyes. She was toying with him. This was never a good sign. Normally, Melissa looked and acted deadly serious. She only ever acted like this on two occasions - when she was drunk, and when under stress. She didn't smell of alcohol.

He got up and opened a nearby cabinet, producing a bottle of whisky and two tumblers. Pouring himself a measure, he offered the bottle to Melissa.

"No," she said firmly. "Not yet."

Not yet?? What did that mean? Did she think she might need a shot later on? Severus decided to make it a double.

"Wise choice," Melissa commented. "You'll need it. Severus, this isn't a social call. Something's come up. Something big. And... I'm going to need your help."

Severus nodded, sipping his drink. He knew it. Had known it since she'd come in, grinning, staring at him like she'd taken some Muggle adrenaline potion. She was never normally this hyperactive. Someone who didn't know her as well as he did might have simply assumed that she'd just had some very good news which she just had to share. Severus knew better. This news was momentous, alright. But not necessarily good.

"What do you need?" he asked gently. He knew better than to refuse her. Beneath her apparent euphoria lay sheer, naked terror. If he could help her, he would.

"Severus," she began, "it's about the Redeemer Prophecy."

Severus nearly dropped his drink. Trying to stay calm, he very carefully lowered the tumbler, placing it on the desk. Was this what he thought it was?

"What about it?" he asked, his voice beginning to shake.

"It's true!" she whispered, her hands flying to her face. "It's true, Severus, it's real, it's happening, it's..." She shook her head, unable to speak.

"What's happening?" Severus asked, his voice rising. He didn't think he could take much more of this. "What's real? The Prophecy?"

Melissa nodded. "She's here, Severus," she whispered. "The Redeemer."

Severus fell back into his chair. He didn't know what to say. Truly had no idea how to react. He'd heard this prophecy since he was a boy, been told that his house, his family, had been condemned to darkness centuries before, but that one day would come the Redeemer who would unite them all and restore their former glory. It had been a childhood dream, a consolation that one day, better days would come. And yet, it had also been a proverb, applied to something longed for yet unlikely to happen for a long time if at all: 'you'll be waiting for that until the Redeemer comes' or 'the Redeemer'll be here before that happens'. Never had he thought for even one second that it would happen in his lifetime.

"Severus?" Melissa asked anxiously. "Are you alright?"

He reached out and drank some more whisky. "Is it true?" he asked, shaking.

"Yes. Yes, it is."

"Who is it?"

"She's eleven years old," said Melissa. "She's a young Muggle-born girl from Surrey, she's led a very sheltered life, and she's completely unprepared for what's ahead of her. She's young, she's vulnerable, and my contacts tell me that she's absolutely terrified."

"Not quite the all-conquering hero I'd been led to expect," said Severus, trying to stop the whisky going everywhere as he refilled his glass.

"She's eleven years old," said Melissa, a hint of savagery in her voice. "What do you expect at that age? She hasn't even begun her education yet. Which is where you come in."

Severus stopped in mid-action. Lowering the bottle, he looked up and stared stright into Melissa's eyes.

"And what exactly am I meant to do?" he said sardonically.

"She starts Hogwarts this year, in just a few weeks," said Melissa. "She'll most likely be in Slytherin. Your House, Severus! She'll be in your care, under your protection. Severus, I need you to look after. Guide her, train her, protect and watch over her. You're best placed to do so, and you're one of the few people I trust. Severus, please!"

"Me?" Severus blinked. "Act as mentor to the Slytherin Redeemer?" He looked at his glass, toying with it before lifting it and draining the contents in one go. He slammed the glass back down again. "Melissa, I can't!" he choked.

Melissa sat up. She clearly hadn't expected that. "Why not?" she said. "I thought you'd want in on something this big!"

Severus shook his head. "Mel, you don't understand. It's not that I don't want to. It's that I can't!"

"Can't... Why not?" snapped Melissa. "Why can't you mentor her? You're already her teacher, or will be."

Severus looked away. How to even begin describing how he felt at the news of the Redeemer's coming? Yes, he wanted it, of course he did. And yet the thought terrified him.

"Melissa," he said softly. "I never told you exactly what prompted me to join the Dark Lord, did I?"

Melissa backed away, not at all sure she wanted to hear this. "I understand it was a failed love affair. That's what you told me."

"Well yes, I did, and that is the main reason. But there was another reason, one event that decided me."

"And that was?" Melissa asked faintly.

"The Redeemer," Severus said softly, so softly Melissa could barely hear him. "That's what. You have no idea, absolutely no idea, how we used and abused the concept back then. We used the prophecy as a recruiting aid, Mel. Told newcomers that the Dark Lord was the Heir of Slytherin come to lead us back to glory, and purify our name and our house. And we told them that in time to come there would rise a Muggle-born called the Redeemer, who would fill our house with Mudbloods and Squibs, and make us subservient to all the other houses. She would make us slaves, and for that reason, we had to destroy her and all those who would support her."

"I know that, Severus, I did see Death Eater propaganda," said Melissa softly. Severus shook his hand, slamming his fist into the table.

"You don't understand!" Severus snarled. "My family was an old one, Mel! My mother claimed descent from Morgan! A junior line, to be sure, but a line nonetheless. We knew the old prophecy, knew what it really meant! I'd been brought up believing the Redeemer to be our foretold saviour!" Severus looked away, unable to face Melissa now. "And all because a Muggle-born who I'd once counted a friend left me for someone else, I turned my back on the whole cause and betrayed the Redeemer. I willingly lied about her, Mel. I told a whole generation of young mages that the Redeemer was a threat to our society. And all because I wanted revenge on my Muggle-born ex-girlfriend."

"That was a long time ago, Severus," said Melissa quietly, although if the truth were told, she was inwardly cursing the fact that Lord Voldemort's anti-Redeemer propaganda had left her facing an uphill struggle. "You weren't to know."

"No, but I should have," Severus replied bitterly. "I should have known better, Mel. I *did* know better. And now she's here and she's going to be in danger, far more danger than she otherwise would have been, because I knew who she really was and lied."

"Which is all the more reason for you to help me now," said Melissa, getting to her feet with a flourish. Time to pull rank. If he wanted to wallow in self-pity and general unworthiness, then so be it. She couldn't talk him out of it, not when he'd spent ten years and more talking himself into it. But she could perhaps make use of what she had. "Yes, she's going to be in a lot of danger. And yes it is certainly your fault." She leaned over the desk, staring deep into his eyes, her face inches from his. "Which is why I'm **ordering** you to make it up to her. Seeing as it's you who put her in danger in the first place, I'm making it your job to try and protect her from the fall-out. If you helped get her into this mess, then you can damn well try and get her out of it. Do you understand me, Severus?"

Silence. For a good few minutes, Severus and Melissa did nothing but stare into each other's eyes. Then Severus began to smile. Laughing, he turned and broke the deadlock.

"Oh, Mel. Mel, Mel, Mel," he laughed. "I've got to hand it to you, you're good. Looking at it from that point of view, I practically owe the girl a life-debt, don't I?"

Got him. Damn, I'm good. A class act bit of manipulation if I do say so myself. Managing to keep herself from smiling, she sat back down again.

"Yes, Severus, I rather think you do," she said, offhand.

"Alright, alright," he sighed. "I'll do as you ask. I'll mentor the girl. Does she know who she is yet?"

"She does. My vacation contact went and told her the story, without my prior authorisation, I might add."

Severus nodded. "Good. Makes my job easier. I pity the poor underling you've got looking after her at the moment."

Melissa wisely decided not to mention who this underling actually was.

"Well, seeing as I've made her the Redeemer's permanent holiday contact, I think she's been duly punished. I was lucky that the girl happened to have a witch from my department living near her."

"Lucky indeed," Severus murmured. He refilled his glass. "Shall we drink a toast?"

"I don't see why not," Melissa smiled, holding out her glass. "What to?"

"How about the future?" Severus suggested. "That's always a good one."

"To the future then," said Melissa as Severus filled her glass. They drank a toast.

"To the future," Severus murmured. It occurred to him that Melissa hadn't actually told him who the Redeemer was. Still, it didn't really matter. He could work it out himself once the Sorting was done with. Right now, he was picturing Slytherin House respected for once. Being able to introduce himself as Head of Slytherin without feeling like he had to apologise for the fact. Slytherin triumphs being applauded by people from outside the house for once, instead of the other houses falling behind whoever was most likely to beat Slytherin. Snape grinned, feeling good for the first time in a long while. Even though the Redemption was likely to be some way off, it was highly unlikely that the Redeemer could be anything other than special. Some decent Slytherins at last! He could hardly wait. "It's been too long." Snape murmured softly. This looked like it was going to be an interesting year.

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Chapter Four: Arrival at Hogwarts

The weeks passed swiftly, and September the first soon came round. After much fussing and emotional goodbyes, Luella left her parents on the main concourse of King's Cross Station, and, gathering her courage, followed Caitlin Tyler through the ticket barrier on to Platform Nine and Three Quarters.

"Are you sure this is going to work?" she asked Caitlin as the two of them eyed up the worryingly solid barrier.

Caitlin nodded. "Positive. I used it all the time when I was at Hogwarts."

"Which was how many years ago?" Deanna asked, standing safely out of reach.

"Not that many!" Caitlin snapped. "Just for that, you can go first."

"Suits me," Deanna shrugged. Wheeling her trolley forward, she lined it up very precisely with the barrier. "Now, the way to do this is quickly. Like so." Mounting the back of the trolley, she pushed off from the ground and went careering off. Luella shut her eyes, awaiting the inevitable crash. To her surprise, there was no sound. Opening her eyes again, she started to see that her friend had disappeared. She turned to Caitlin, who was looking pained.

"One of these days that girl is going to seriously injure herself," she sighed. She noticed Luella looking at her and smiled. "Don't worry, Luella. It's not compulsory to do it that way. Come on, let's go through. Just take it slowly, I'll be right behind you."

Luella gritted her teeth and went for it, pushing the trolley before her. Behind her, she could sense Caitlin steering her in the right direction. She hesitated as she approached the barrier, but a tap on the shoulder from Caitlin gave her confidence.

"Just go for it, you'll be fine," she heard Caitlin say. Taking a deep breath, she drove into the barrier.

Instead of the crash she'd been expecting, there was simply blackness and a whooshing noise for the briefest of instants. Luella staggered forward, her sense of balance temporarily gone, and then she was there, on the platform, clinging on to a luggage trolley, with Deanna and Caitlin helping her steady herself. She'd made it.

"See?" Caitlin was saying. "That wasn't so hard was it?"

"Is this it, then?" Luella asked, her dizziness clearing.

"Sure is!" Deanna spoke up. "Isn't this place stunning?"

Luella looked around her. The place certainly was amazing. The platform itself looked like a huge Victorian station, with none of the grime and concrete normally associated with British Rail. Everywhere she looked, there were witches and wizards

shepherding their black-robed offspring around, and lots of Muggle-borns wandering around looking a bit lost. Nearest to them was a plump red-haired woman telling off a couple of similarly red-haired twins, who it seemed were also Hogwarts first years. However, the most imposing sight of all was the steam train next to them.

"Wow!" Luella was impressed. "What is that?"

"The Hogwarts Express!" Deanna told her. "That's taking us to school."

"It is?" Luella still couldn't get her head around the idea of going to school on a train at all, much less a steam one. In fact, she couldn't remember the last time she'd even seen one close up. True, Deanna had mentioned the Hogwarts Express before now. Words, however, had not done it justice. "It's huge!" she whispered.

"Needs to be, to get you all to school," said Caitlin dryly. "There's three hundred of you going after all." Leaving Luella to digest that information, she turned away, her attention distracted by someone else emerging on to the platform. "Melissa!" she called.

Sure enough, Melissa Lovegood had appeared, followed by her daughter and by an older boy in black robes with green-and-silver trimmings who could only be her son. Luella tensed. Last time they'd all met up, it had been all she could do to keep Deanna and Marlie from coming to blows. *Please*, she prayed to herself. *Please don't let them start a fight right here on the platform. Not in front of all these people.* She didn't think she could stand the thought of her school career starting like that.

Melissa and Caitlin's greeting was rather more conventional this time, consisting of a handshake and an embrace.

"What, no Auror greeting this time?" Luella asked Deanna.

Deanna shook her head. "It's not generally considered a good idea to sneak up on my mum," she said delicately. She turned on a smile as Melissa turned her attention their way and the usual formalities were exchanged. Then, the two adults turned away to discuss other things, and the children were left on their own. *Here we go*, Luella thought. *Fighting time.*

She was in luck. Deanna seemed to be feeling positively friendly. Ignoring Marlie entirely, she headed straight for her brother.

"Hey, Mikey!" she said with a smile.

To Luella's surprise, the older Lovegood seemed equally pleased to see Deanna. "Hello, Trouble," he replied with a grin. "All ready for Hogwarts?"

"Too right!" Deanna laughed, before turning to Luella. "Mike, this is my friend Luella. She's coming to Hogwarts too. Lu, this is Mike Lovegood. He's a friend of mine."

"Pleased to meet you," said Mike. His blue eyes looked Luella up and down, as if he was trying to remember where he'd seen her before. "Marlie told me about you."

Luella was instantly on her guard. *Told him what, exactly?* She shot a glance at Marlie, but her face was giving nothing away.

"Has she?" Luella asked. "What's she been saying?"

"That's just it," said Mike, frowning. "Absolutely nothing. She just keeps dropping hints that you're one to watch."

Marlie looked away, trying to appear innocent but without success. Luella could only sigh in frustration. Great, there went her cover, at least partially. She'd hoped to get by without drawing attention to herself. Nice one, Marlie. All of a sudden, a fight between Deanna and Marlie didn't seem like such a bad idea.

Marlie, however, proved to be adept at covering her tracks.

"That's cause she's really smart," she said, putting an arm around Luella's shoulder with a decidedly overfriendly smile. "Aren't you, Lu?"

"When it comes to Muggle things, yeah," said Luella. "Not sure how I'll do at magical things, though." She smiled nervously, trying to look for all the world as if she was just another Muggle-born off to Hogwarts for the first time, and feeling nervous. Not a foretold saviour. Oh no. In no way was she different to any other kid at this school in the slightest.

Mike seemed to buy this excuse and the awkward moment passed. Deanna changed the subject with but a fleeting glare in Marlie's direction, asking Mike who he thought was going to win the league that season. As the conversation moved on to matters barely comprehensible to Luella, Mike and Deanna moved away, leaving Luella alone with Marlie.

"So, er, hi?" said Marlie sheepishly.

"Hi yourself," said Luella, still wary. Marlie seemed friendly enough... but Luella still wasn't sure she entirely trusted her. She wanted to ask exactly what Marlie had said to her brother about her, but decided that it probably wasn't a good idea. She didn't seem to have said anything she shouldn't, and Luella for one didn't want to encourage her. So she decided to stay on safer ground.

"So how long have Deanna and your brother been friends then?" she asked.

"Ages," Marlie sighed. "Virtually ever since she started coming round. Tyler hated me on sight, so I think Mum told Mike to befriend her. So he did, and gods know how, but the two of them actually decided they liked each other. And now, every time she comes round, the two of them go off together and start playing Risk and Monopoly. Still, if the geeks want to go off and play together, that's fine by me."

Luella turned to look at Deanna and Mike again. The two of them were now engaged in a heated debate over the relative merits of what appeared to be two sports teams, the Harpies and Falmouth. It struck Luella that she barely knew her best friend at all. All these years and she'd been leading this completely separate life in which she

played war games and debated Quidditch, and appeared to be a devoted fan of the Holyhead Harpies. And Luella had known nothing about any of it, and if fate hadn't made her a witch, she would know nothing about it now. The thought sobered her, as she realised that the previously close-knit, almost blood-bound friendship she'd had with Deanna before was by no means a given now that they were both out of the Muggle world.

"Everything's going to be so different now," she whispered to herself.

"What, you hadn't worked that out when that snake appeared?" Marlie murmured in her ear.

That had her. In a moment, Luella had turned on Marlie.

"What do you know about that?" she demanded. Time to find out exactly what Marlie knew. Auror's daughter she might be, but Marlie had yet to earn Luella's trust.

"Calm down, your secret's safe with me," said Marlie, backing away, slightly taken aback by Luella's outburst. "Mum told me everything when we got home." She looked around her, trying to see if anyone was listening in. "But this isn't really the place. We can talk more when we get to school. I take it Tyler knows too?"

"Caitlin Tyler told us both when we got back," said Luella, stony-faced and not at all sure she wanted Marlie Lovegood in on things. Still, it didn't seem like she had any say in the matter.

"That's good," Marlie nodded. "Good we all know, it makes things easier."

"What things??" Luella definitely didn't like the sound of that. Exactly what was being planned for her?

"You know, things," said Marlie. "Fighting and arse-kicking type of things. With possibly some plotting and scheming type things thrown in for good measure. At least, that's kinda what I was hoping for, anyhow. Is there likely to be any of that along the way?"

"Er... I hadn't really thought about it," said Luella weakly, not sure how to react to this unbridled enthusiasm. "I'm sure there will be eventually." She wondered exactly how long it would take before Marlie's commitment waned, or if Marlie was actually any good in a fight. Probably not, she suspected.

"Cool," Marlie grinned. "In that case, you can count me in." She took Luella by the arm, not noticing or more likely, not caring about, Luella's reluctance, and proceeded to head towards the train.

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It wasn't long before they were ready to leave. Melissa and Caitlin had taken leave of their offspring with the usual warnings of what would happen if they misbehaved, requests to take care and in Melissa's case, telling Mike to look after his sister.

Fortunately for Luella, he'd complied virtually immediately and taken not just Marlie but Deanna temporarily off her hands, leaving her free to explore for a bit. For some reason, someone or something seemed to be calling her, telling her that there was something she had to find, something she had to do or all would be lost. It was most strange. She just hoped that whatever it was would prove easy to find.

She wandered the corridors aimlessly, trying to avoid getting jostled by all the other students racing up and down the corridor, all shouting and yelling to their friends. She did get bumped into occasionally, but for the most part, they acted as if she wasn't even there.

However, that didn't mean Luella was exactly enjoying fighting her way down the packed corridor. Intuition be damned, she'd by now decided that there was nothing here that wouldn't be waiting for her at Hogwarts, and abandoned the quest in favour of hunting down Deanna. No sign of her anywhere though, nor were the two Lovegoods anywhere to be seen. Finally, she gave up on them entirely and dived into an empty compartment just to get out of the crowd.

Except it wasn't as empty as she'd thought. Seated in one corner, looking up from the book she'd been reading, which, Luella noticed, was a Muggle one, was a young girl with thoughtful brown eyes and reddish-brown hair, wearing the all-black robes which marked her out as a fellow first year. She was staring at Luella as if she'd just seen Elvis walk in.

"Um, hello?" said Luella nervously. The girl was unnerving her a little, although maybe she was just surprised at being barged in on.

The red-haired girl seemed to gather her wits and smiled. "Hi there," she said, in a soft-spoken voice with an accent that Luella didn't think she'd heard before. It sounded a bit American, but wasn't. "You're a first year too, hey."

Luella glanced down at her robes. "Yeah," she admitted. "Muggle-born too. Doubly the new girl."

"Muggle-born?" The other girl raised an eyebrow. "Really? Although I suppose..." She indicated the seat opposite. "Take a seat, why don't you? I'm Rianne. Rianne Stormosi."

"Stormosi? Are you Italian then?" asked Luella, wondering why Rianne didn't sound Italian. Not English, certainly, but not really Italian either.

"My dad is," Rianne said with a grimace. "Me, I'm not entirely sure what I am. My mum was Welsh, I was born in Wales, I grew up travelling around the States, and I came back to Wales when my oldest sister started Hogwarts. That was five years ago. I'm kind of a Welsh-Yankee hybrid. That's what the accent is by the way. Hollywood meets the Rhondda."

"I did wonder," said Luella with a smile. Her earlier nervousness was melting away as she began to warm to Rianne. Rianne seemed as adrift in the world as she felt at the

moment. She hoped that they ended up in the same house, whatever it was. "So why all the travelling then?"

"I'm really not sure," said Rianne, frowning. "My mum died not long after I was born, and we took off not long after that. I don't think Dad could bear to stay in the family home without her, so off we went. The States is something of a frontier land for our kind, that's why he chose it. No one to know us, no one to bother us."

"That must have been pretty bad," said Luella softly. She couldn't imagine how that had been for her, never knowing her mother, no permanent home to call her own. It wasn't a life she'd have wanted.

"Eh, don't feel sorry for me." Rianne brushed off her sympathy, not unkindly. "It wasn't so bad. I'd never known anything else, and it was kinda fun, travelling around, never in the same place twice. I was most upset when we finally did settle down. So boring, stuck in the same town all the time. Didn't seem right."

Luella had to smile at that. How many times had she wished she could be somewhere else? Now that Rianne mentioned it, travelling didn't seem such a bad option.

"Well, if you take to the road again, let me know, I might come and join you," Luella grinned.

"It's not a life for everyone," Rianne warned her. "Not if you're not used to it. But then, I don't think we really choose the life we lead. It has a tendency to choose us, wouldn't you say?" She looked at Luella then, and Luella had the strange feeling that, even though she'd told Rianne next to nothing about herself, not even her name, Rianne already knew everything of importance about her, and that nothing she said would be news to her. It was an unnerving feeling.

"It certainly does," she found herself saying, thinking of her own secret. Hot on the heels of that thought came another one, that her status as Slytherin Redeemer also wouldn't shock Rianne. She wasn't sure whether to be angry or worried. However, for some reason, it didn't seem to matter. There was something solid about Rianne, even though she was very slenderly built and on the tall side. Something firm, earthy, safe about her. She was someone you could rely on, Luella could feel that very strongly. *I really hope she's in my house.* She wanted to be friends with Rianne, that she was sure of.

"You haven't told me who you are yet," Rianne cut in. She seemed to be sizing up Luella very carefully, although she seemed interested as opposed to wary.

"Luella," Luella answered. "My name's Luella. Luella Martin."

Rianne raised an eyebrow. "Is that so? Nice name. Means 'renowned of the Elven Folk', you know." She looked Luella over again. "Suits you," she said with a mysterious smile.

"Elven folk?" Luella asked. "Who are they?"

"A race of the past, who left this Earth long ago. But some of their descendants still remain, and their powers are still to be found in those of the old blood even today." Rianne held out her hand in greeting. "Honoured to meet you."

Luella took it, no longer put off by Rianne's oddness, but intrigued rather. "Pleased to meet you too," she said. They squeezed each other's hands, and for a moment that hung in the air for an eternity, their eyes met. *Power still to be found in those of the old blood. Are you one of them, Rianne Stormosi? Do you know that I might be too?* Even as she thought that, she somehow knew that Rianne almost certainly did know. The thought didn't bother her, although she knew full well it should. All she felt was that she was looking into the eyes of someone akin to her in many ways, someone she could relate to on many, many levels. Looking into Rianne's eyes, she felt as if she'd come home.

They stayed like that for a while, before Rianne let her go, shaking her hair back.

"So, you want to spend the journey with me? I could do with the company, and apart from my two older sisters, you're the only person I know here."

"I'd love to," Luella smiled. "The alternative is trying to keep my best friend and her worst enemy from killing each other, and to be honest, it's getting a little tiring."

"Getting to the stage where you'd actually happily see them murder each other just to get some peace, is it?" Rianne grinned. Luella could only nod in agreement.

"Well, never mind," Rianne continued. "Assuming we're both in the same house, and maybe even if we're not, you and I can disappear and leave them to it. Either that or concoct a diabolical scheme to murder them both and make it look like an accident."

Luella couldn't help but laugh at that. "We can't do that!" she choked. "Their mothers'd kill us!"

"I notice you're not objecting on ethical grounds though," said Rianne with a grin. "You Slytherin, you."

Luella started. *Oh god, please no. I don't want to be a Slytherin! Don't want to have to fight...*

"Slytherin?" she whispered.

Rianne froze briefly, but she was quick to recover. "Yeah, you know. Slytherin. Les Verts et Argents. House of the Cunning and Ambitious. Official mascot the snake, unofficial mascot the weasel."

Luella forced out a nervous laugh, causing Rianne to look positively insulted.

"What?" she demanded. "What's wrong with you? Are my witty quips only worth a titter?"

"It's not that," said Luella uneasily. "It's just that I heard Slytherin's the evil house."

"Don't believe everything you hear then," Rianne retorted. "My mother was one. So are my sisters. And chances are I'll be one too." She watched Luella carefully as she said this. "Yeah, that's right," she breathed. "I'm a future Slytherin. You still wanna hang with me?"

Luella could only nod wordlessly, as relief started spreading through her system. *We'll be in the same house. Rianne's a Slytherin too.*

"Can I?" she whispered.

Rianne's indignation vanished in a second, as she smiled back at her. "Any time, Luella. Any time." They fell silent for a while, until Rianne spoke up again.

"So whose kids are they then?"

"Eh?" Luella had completely forgotten about Deanna and Marlie in the interim.

"Your feuding buddies," Rianne pressed. "Whose kids are they? You mentioned their mothers being people you wouldn't want to piss off."

"Oh, right. So I did," said Luella, gathering her wits. "Er, they're Melissa Lovegood and Caitlin Tyler's daughters."

That got Rianne's attention. "They're who?" she shrieked. "Lovegood and Tyler??"

"You've heard of them?" Luella asked.

Rianne nodded as if not having heard of them was akin to not knowing who the Beatles were. "Oh have I ever!" she gasped. "Lovegood and Tyler are only the two toughest Aurors in the Ministry! *Duwies*, Lu, forget I ever even mentioned killing their kids. In no way would I want those two on my case. Gods, Lu, *everyone's* heard of Lovegood and Tyler." And then Rianne had her head in her hands, moaning softly. "Hades, they were Slytherins too. Their kids are in our year, likely to be in our house, and they hate each other." She finally lifted her eyes. They had the look of a condemned soul. "Luella, it's going to be hell on earth."

"I know," Luella sighed. "Rianne, if murder's out of the question, how about we just commit suicide together instead? Maybe the note will prompt their better natures to behave themselves."

"Not any use to us if we're dead, is it?" Rianne snapped. However, she was considering the possibility. "Maybe we could fake it. How's your acting?"

"Not sure. Never had to fake my own death before. Yours?"

"Not up to that, I'm sure," Rianne sighed. "We can only hope the Mutually Assured Destruction scenario wins out. For them anyway."

"For who?" another voice put in. Luella felt her heart sink. It was Marlie, back again. She waltzed in without waiting to be invited and sat down next to Luella, looking at

both girls hopefully. She seemed to notice that they'd both stopped talking. "Hey, don't stop the conversation on my account!" She nodded at Luella. "Go on. Say stuff. Chat. Exchange witty quips and banter. Don't mind me." She sat back expectantly.

"Is this...?" Rianne asked, the unspoken words being 'one of the two you mentioned earlier?'. Luella nodded.

"I see," said Rianne. "And is she...?" The unvoiced words this time were 'the best friend or worst enemy?' Luella obliged with an introduction.

"Rianne, this is Marlie Lovegood," said Luella, giving Rianne a meaningful look. "Melissa Lovegood's daughter. I mentioned her earlier."

"That you did," said Rianne softly. "How long have you known each other?"

"Oh, we met over the summer," Marlie grinned. "We were in Diagon Alley shopping, and it turns out her best friend's mum is good friends with my mum. Small world, eh?"

"Small indeed," Rianne murmured. "And you're the daughter of the Webmistress. Named after a fallen comrade in arms of hers."

"Yeah," Marlie sighed. "One of her Auror mates snuffs it a month before I'm born, and hey presto, I get named after her."

"Who was that?" Luella asked. For some reason, she couldn't imagine a tough, Dark-Arts fighting, warrior witch calling herself Marlie. It wasn't exactly the most frightening name imaginable.

"Marlene MacKinnon," Marlie said. "That's what Marlie's short for, by the way. In case you were wondering."

"Oh. Right." Luella pondered that for a bit before asking the next question. "So why does no one use your full name then?"

Marlie shrugged dismissively. "Superstition," she sighed. "Load of rubbish if you ask me, to give me a cool name like Marlene and then ban me from using it."

Luella looked to Rianne for an explanation.

"It's considered unlucky to name someone after a person who died violently," Rianne explained. "Apparently it's like you're forcing someone else's karma on the child. It's said that the dead person's spirit will come back and take the child's soul over. So you have to either vary the name a bit or call them by a nickname so the spirit gets confused."

"Load of rubbish, if you ask me," Marlie opined.

Luella wasn't quite so sure. "Didn't you say earlier that you'd be well up for fighting and general arse-kicking?" she asked shrewdly.

Marlie just smiled, unbothered by the inconsistency. "Well, yeah. But I wouldn't want to *have* to fight. Not like an Auror."

"Mindless violence just a hobby for you then, is it?" asked Rianne innocently. Marlie flashed a glare at her.

"Luella, who's your friend?" Marlie asked coldly. Clearly that last comment had got to her.

Luella was about to speak when Rianne cut in. "Name's Rianne. Rianne Stormosi. Ring any bells?"

It certainly did. Marlie stared back, open-mouthed, her eyes widening.

"Oh my god!" she squealed, clapping her hands to her face. "You're Alfredo Stormosi's daughter!"

"Who?" asked Luella in confusion, the name meaning nothing to her. Rianne for her part was sitting back, smiling smugly at Marlie.

"Why don't you tell her, Lovegood?" she said. Marlie duly obliged.

"He used to be the Beater for the Falcons and Italy," Marlie whispered, awestruck. "He was really good, one of the best! My brother practically idolises him, which is partly why he hangs out with his daughter. His other daughter, that is." Recognition seemed to dawn. "Hey, you're Kat's sister!"

Rianne nodded. "That's right. And you're Mikey Lovegood's little sis. He's mentioned you."

"Really?" Marlie's eyes narrowed. "What's he been saying about me?"

"Not much," Rianne replied with a grin. "You only seemed to get mentioned in sentences starting with 'Don't worry, Kat, Rianne's not as bad as...!'"

Marlie's jaw dropped again. "The cheeky...!" She shut her mouth again, turning on the charm once more. "Please ignore him. Like most older siblings, he likes nothing better than to badmouth his younger sister. I'm sure you know the feeling, having two of your own."

Rianne had to agree. "You have a point," she conceded. However, she was prevented from saying anything further by Deanna's arrival.

"There you are, Lu, I've been looking for you every-" She stopped in midsentence as she noticed Marlie. "Oh," she said flatly. "You're here."

Marlie, still starstruck by the presence of the child of one of her idols, quite forgot she and Deanna were meant to be mortal enemies.

"Tyler, you'll never guess whose daughter this is!" she enthused. "Only Alfredo Stormosi's kid!"

Deanna too temporarily forgot that Marlie was no friend of hers. "Really?" she asked wide-eyed. "What, *the* Alfredo Stormosi?"

"The one and only," said Rianne, amused.

"Wow." Deanna sank down into the seat next to her. "That's so cool." She looked at Rianne curiously. "So. Why did he retire at the peak of his career then. He wasn't injured, he still had plenty of years left in him. Why'd he just step down and leave the country?"

"Deanna!" Luella gasped, appalled that her friend could be so tactless. "Maybe Rianne doesn't want to talk about it!"

"What?" Deanna protested. "It's one of the great mysteries of modern Quidditch! Alfredo Stormosi had everything - fame, money, a glittering career, a wife and three kids, and then he just gave it all up and took the entire family off to America for the best part of ten years. And nowhere does it ever say why. I just wanted to know."

"Maybe it's personal," said Luella, still amazed that her friend could be so upfront.

"No, I don't mind," said Rianne with a sigh. "Had to come up sooner or later. Anyway, it's no great mystery, not really. My mum died suddenly, and Dad felt he just had to get away. That's all."

"Oh." Now that she'd heard the truth, Deanna rather wished she hadn't asked. "Right. Sorry. Er, forget I said anything."

"Nice one, Tyler," Marlie's voice cut across, tones as icy as the atmosphere was becoming. "Offend her from the start, why don't you?" She turned to Rianne with an ingratiating smile. "I am so sorry about her, she doesn't know when to shut up."

"Hey look, we do have something in common after all," Deanna noted. "There's a thing. Rianne, please ignore her. You don't want to hang around with her, she's annoying."

"What?" Marlie yelled, now really wound up. "Don't you even think about muscling in, I saw her first!"

Deanna bridled at this, and it looked as if another round of squabbling was about to break out. Luella could stand it no longer. Rianne was giving her a pained look, and the last thing Luella wanted was to have her new friendship wrecked by all the bickering.

"When you've all quite finished," she snapped, leaping to her feet, an anger-fuelled power and confidence she hadn't known she'd possessed filling her, "I think you'll both find that *I* was here before either of you. I was making friends with Rianne before I even knew who her father was, not that his name really means anything to me

anyway. And I will not have you two fighting over her just because you want to be friends with a celebrity's daughter. You befriend her for herself or you back off. Have you both got that?"

The effect was immediate. Both Deanna and Marlie promptly shut up, staring at her in awe. Luella could have sworn she heard Marlie squeak, but apart from that, all was silence. Both nodded, mute.

"Good." Luella sat down again, shaking at what she'd just done. Had she really told her best friend and a girl who knew her darkest secret and who was so far less than trustworthy to sit down and shut up? And, more amazing still, had they really done just that? It appeared so. Deciding to make the most of it, Luella set about enforcing a temporary truce.

"Then let's pass this journey in peace, shall we? Let's be civil, polite and non-violent, at least until we get there. And if there is any more arguing, Rianne and I shall throw you both out and enjoy a compartment to ourselves. Is that quite clear?"

It was. Deanna and Marlie both agreed, and peace of a kind reigned. While neither of the two bitter enemies were talking, at least they weren't arguing. Both had reached into the trunks that had magically appeared in the compartment with them, and were now engrossed in books, Deanna in a book on kickboxing techniques and Marlie in something which looked oddly like an electronics manual. Strange, Luella had never had her down as the technical type. It just went to show.

"Impressive," Rianne murmured. "Remind me never to upset you - you've got quite a natural authority thing going there."

"I'm not normally like that," Luella whispered back. "It's just... they were getting to me, you know?"

"Hey, don't apologise!" Rianne grinned. "We've got eight hours with them at least, and you've just ensured a peaceful journey. Nice one!"

"Thanks!" Luella smiled. Whatever lay in wait for her at journey's end, the journey itself looked set to be a good one.

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Finally, they arrived at their destination, the train pulling at a small station looking like something from *The Railway Children*. There was only one oddity, and that was that despite the smallness of the station buildings, the actual platform seemed disproportionately long. She was soon to find out why, as the train came to a halt, and nearly three hundred students poured out of every available door. Separated from her friends in the rush, Luella found herself pushed by the crowd, and decided it was best to allow herself to be taken where they led. After all, they were all going to the same place eventually.

The crowd began to disperse as it left the station. A gruff voice rang out over the throng of students, calling out "Firs' years this way! All firs' years over 'ere!"

Luella fought her way through the crowd, which had by now thinned into groups of students chatting to each other. In the direction of the voice, she was met with an amazing sight. Towering above everyone else, looking especially large next to the first years surrounding him, was a giant of a man, with black bushy hair and beard, and fierce but gentle eyes.

"Gather roun', firs' years! Come here, kids!" he was calling, over the heads of the students, most of whom ignored him and passed by. Luella went over to him, and joined Deanna, Marlie and Rianne who were huddled together in a small group. Marlie shrieked suddenly, as one of the red-haired twins dropped something down her back.

"You bastards!" she squealed. "You wait until we get to school, Fred and George Weasley, I'll have both of you!" She danced about, contorting herself, while Rianne helped retrieve the live newt that the boy had thrown down there.

"Git," Marlie snarled. "He's one of the Weasley twins, you want to watch out for them. Real little troublemakers. They're our neighbours, and our dads are friends. The amount of trouble I've had from them all my life, they seem to take a personal delight in making my life hell."

"Who's he?" Luella asked, indicating the giant man.

Rianne answered her. "I'm not certain about this, but I think that might be Hagrid."

Luella was about to ask who Hagrid was, when the man himself cleared his throat, surveyed the scene and apparently decided that everyone who was going to turn up had done.

"Right! Now yeh're all 'ere, let me introduce meself. I'm Rubeus Hagrid, Hogwarts gamekeeper, altho' most folks just call me Hagrid. It's my job ter take yeh all ter Hogwarts. Follow me, you lot." And with that, he led the way, with the first years in his wake.

They turned a corner, and were met with an awesome sight. The path led sharply downhill towards a lake, which was sparkling in the twilight. Even more impressive, however, was the castle on the other side of the lake, silhouetted by the setting sun. It was a beautiful sight.

Luella heard Deanna catch her breath. On the other side of her, she heard Marlie whisper "Hogwarts!"

Hagrid flung out his arm to encompass the scene before them. "There yeh go, children! Hogwarts Castle is before yeh. I'd make a speech or summat, but I think I'll let the view speak fer itself."

They gazed at it for a long while, before Hagrid broke the spell and led them to the shore. There was a small wooden jetty by the lakeside, and bobbing up and down at the end was a small rowing boat.

Deanna looked at it, dismayed. "That little thing's not going to carry us all over, is it? We'll be here all night!"

Hagrid heard her. "Don't yeh worry, miss!" he said heartily. "We'll all be there in time for the feast!"

He began organising the students. Each boat could safely carry four children, so everyone started forming groups. Luella decided to remain with Deanna and company. The first boatload departed and a second boat suddenly rose up out of the water, much to Deanna's relief and Luella's amazement.

"Won't it be all wet inside?" she asked, worried.

Rianne snorted with laughter, Deanna shook her head, grinning, while Marlie gave her a slightly patronising look. Luella felt her face go red. It looked like she had a lot to get used to.

Their turn came, and the four of them clambered into a boat. Deanna was too enthralled to be nasty to anyone, and was just gazing at the stars. Marlie was looking back, at the small village of Hogsmeade glimmering in the darkness. Rianne, however, had her eyes fixed solely on Hogwarts. She had an odd expression on her face, a strange half-smile. Almost like she was coming home.

The voyage passed in a strange silence. Everyone in the other boats was similarly awestruck. It was almost a disappointment when the boat fetched up on the shore and they had to clamber out. The boats drifted under an old stone archway and into a small underground harbour. Luella scrambled out of the boat and waited with the others.

It took some time for everyone to arrive. Hagrid stepped out of the last boat, along with two very nervous first years who had been in the boat with him. The boat had been riding very low in the water at some points, and now it proceeded to sink even lower as the boats returned to wherever they had come from. Hagrid looked around, checked that everyone was OK, and walked on.

They followed him up a winding, spiral staircase. Marlie whimpered slightly and hugged the cave wall. There was a large drop on the other side and no handrail. Luella shared Marlie's evident fear of heights and desperately tried to avoid looking in that direction, keeping her eyes fixed firmly on the back of Hagrid's head.

Eventually, they passed through a doorway and into what was clearly the Entrance Hall. Huddled together in a large group, they gazed around at the carved stonework and various statues of famous witches and wizards of the past. Then came a clear, sharp, woman's voice ringing out across the hall.

"Thank you, Hagrid, I will take them from here. You may go now." The speaker was a middle-aged sharp-faced woman Luella recognised instantly as Professor McGonagall. Hagrid bowed and headed towards another set of doors leading to a crowded, noisy room which must be the Great Hall. Evidently there was some kind of feast to mark the start of term.

Professor McGonagall led them into a small side room. Everyone crowded in and watched her, silent.

"Welcome, children, to Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. At present, the rest of the school is at the inaugural feast to mark the beginning of term. However, before the feast can begin, there is a very important ceremony to be carried out. That ceremony, as I'm sure those of you with siblings already at Hogwarts will know, is the Sorting Ceremony."

A ripple of comment went through the crowd at these words. Luella felt her blood run cold at the thought of it, and looked at Deanna for reassurance. Deanna looked back at her, smiled, and gripped her hand tightly. She leaned over and whispered, "Lu, whatever happens, we'll face it together, OK? You'll always have my support." Luella nodded weakly, and turned her attention back to Professor McGonagall.

Professor McGonagall continued "The Sorting Ceremony is, some would say, the most crucial part of your time at Hogwarts. It is this ceremony that decides what house you will be in, and this, more than anything else, can play the biggest part in how your career at Hogwarts develops. Your house is like your family at Hogwarts. You will share a dormitory with others in your house, attend classes in your houses, spend your spare time in your house common room accessible only to other members of your house, eat your meals in your houses, and support your house Quidditch team. Your closest friends at Hogwarts are likely to be from your own house. In short, the house you are in is quite important. Each has its own character and history, and looks for different things in its members. Each has produced excellent witches and wizards, so do not think your capacity for achievement is limited by your house. Hogwarts has opportunities for all its students to excel. The four houses, Gryffindor, Ravenclaw, Hufflepuff and Slytherin, compete annually for the House Cup and winning it is a great honour for your house. Your successes will earn your house points towards the trophy, while rulebreaking will lose points. I hope all of you will contribute to the reputation of whichever house becomes yours."

Professor McGonagall regarded them critically. "I need to make preparations before the Ceremony can begin. You will wait here for now. I shall return when we are ready for you." She left the room without another word, closing the door behind her.

Immediately, the entire room burst out into conversation, most of it concerning what the Sorting Ceremony might involve, and what houses they'd end up in.

Marlie appeared to have few worries about the forthcoming ceremony.

"Well, Michael reckoned it was really painful and humiliating, but he doesn't seem to be too traumatised and he's a big wuss when it comes to pain. I'm more concerned about what house I'm in."

"You wanted to be a Slytherin, didn't you?" Luella recalled the day they first met in Diagon Alley.

Marlie sniffed a bit. "Well, as long as I'm not in the same house as those two", here she indicated the Weasley twins who were busy terrorising one boy by pretending to

swallow his toad, "I really don't care." Clearly the newt incident had not been forgotten.

It was at that moment that Professor McGonagall returned. "Alright, if you can all stop talking, it's time. Follow me." She led the way out, across the Entrance Hall and into the Great Hall.

The Great Hall fell silent as they entered. It was dominated by four long tables at which the rest of the school were seated. There were a fair few spaces around, which Luella guessed must be for them. As all the students at each table had the same colour sash, there was evidently one for each house. At the far end was another table, which appeared to be for the teachers. Luella, however, was distracted by Deanna grabbing her elbow and pointing at the ceiling. Looking up, her jaw dropped.

Where a ceiling should have been, there was only sky. Above her was a deep blue night sky with stars scattered across it.

"It's enchanted," Deanna whispered. "Made to look like the real sky! Great, isn't it?"

Luella just nodded. She was painfully aware of how quiet it was in here. McGonagall led them to the front of the hall in front of the teachers' table, where they lined up facing the school. Luella felt the whole school's eyes on her and began to go weak at the knees. Had anyone ever collapsed in fright during the Sorting? She had a nasty feeling she might be the first.

The room seemed to go quiet. Everyone's attention was drawn to a small three-legged stool in between the middle two tables, just before the line of apprehensive first-years. On it was a very old, very shabby, blue star-spangled pointy hat. Luella was wondering what possible use it could be, when, giving her the fright of her life, a mouth opened up above the rim and it began to sing.

*"A thousand merry years ago,
When the moon was full and round,
Four great and mighty mages
Sought a hallowed ground.
Fair Hogwarts Castle was the place
Where their endeavour received full grace.
To educate the mages' young
In magic, potions, charms and song
Was the task of the Hogwarts Four;
Their like will be seen never more.
Each chose from the black-clad youthful throng
The students to which their hearts would belong,
Until one day as they all grew old,
A new way was sought of dividing the fold.
And so it was that I was instated
To choose the students that were related.
Whoever wears me and opens her mind,
Will her Hogwarts family find.
Will you be a Gryffindor, brave and true?"*

*Those hardy folk never fear to lose.
Or will it be Hufflepuff, patient and kind?
Friends these people always will find.
Maybe Ravenclaw, keepers of knowledge;
Their brains and learning are the pride of this college.
Then there is Slytherin, cunning and secret;
When these folk want something, they move mountains to seek it.
Whichever group calls you to its bosom,
I wish you the best in the house you have chosen.
And whatever path takes you through school and beyond,
May you always have memories of which you'll be fond!"*

Applause greeted the end of the song. Luella heard some of the teachers behind her commenting on the quality.

"Very good sense of meter and rhyme."

"If you discount the beginning, yes. It left much to be desired; I've come to expect better. However, I must applaud the house descriptions, best I've heard in a long time."

The hubbub died away, as Professor McGonagall began to speak again. She was giving them instructions.

"Before you lies the Sorting Stool, and on it, the Sorting Hat. When your name is called, you will go to the stool, remove your own hat, sit down and place the Sorting Hat on your head. The Hat will then determine your house. Once it has done so, remove the Hat and leave it on the stool for the next child. Then take your seat at the appropriate house table. Are there any questions?" There were none, although most of the first years were looking highly relieved that all they had to do was put a hat on. Professor McGonagall began to read out their names from a scroll, starting with "Aherne, Kevin". Kevin Aherne walked slowly over to the hat and put it on, shaking. After a few minutes, the hat announced "HUFFLEPUFF!" Kevin took the hat off, flushed and happy as he made his way to the cheering Hufflepuffs, very pleased at having got the first Sortee of the year.

The first Sorting out of the way, the other first years seemed to cheer up. Astel, Jessica ("RAVENCLAW!"), Bell, Katie ("GRYFFINDOR!"), Bryant, Christopher ("SLYTHERIN!") and Chang, Cho ("RAVENCLAW!") all followed fairly quickly. Then came "Foxworth, Geoffrey" ("SLYTHERIN!"), who was given a hearty welcome by the boy sat opposite Kat Stormosi. More were sorted, and then Luella began to worry. Johnson, Angelina, and Jordan, Lee went to Gryffindor, and Levant, Jessamyn ended up in Ravenclaw. Then it was the turn of Lovegood, Marlene.

Rianne gave Marlie a pat on the back, whispering "Good Luck!" Luella could only manage a weak smile while Deanna remained impassive. Marlie walked determinedly to the stool, whisked off her hat, spun round and sat down. Then, with gritted teeth, she took a deep breath and put the Sorting Hat on.

The hall went quiet. Luella glanced at the Slytherin table and noticed Mike Lovegood and a red-haired girl who looked remarkably like Rianne looking at Marlie anxiously. They need not have worried. The Hat had barely touched her head before screaming "SLYTHERIN!" The Slytherin table went mad and Mike hugged his friend excitedly. Marlie pulled the Hat off, and grinned at Luella, her face flushed and smiling madly, her sash and hatband magically changing to Slytherin's silver and green stripes. She put the Hat down, and scampered off to join her brother, who hugged her and told his neighbours to make room. Luella's sick feeling eased a little. At least one of them had got the house she wanted.

Lundy, William was sorted into Hufflepuff, while Lynch, Alexander, found his way into Slytherin. And then it was her turn.

"Martin, Luella", Professor McGonagall's voice rang out. Shaking, Luella stepped forward, barely noticing Deanna patting her on the back and whispering "Go, Lu!", and Rianne clutching her hand in solidarity. She pulled her hat off and walked towards the stool. What had seemed a distance of only a few metres before now seemed to take forever. The hall had gone quiet. She finally reached the stool and sat down, picking up the Sorting Hat. She took one last look towards the teachers' table and met Deanna's eyes. Deanna winked back at her. Luella smiled and prepared to put the Hat on. It was then she noticed the teacher sitting behind where she had been standing. He was staring at her intently, a look of fierce concentration on his face. There was no doubting who he was. It was Professor Snape, in the flesh. Hastily, just to avoid that gaze, she pulled the Hat on.

Immediately, the world went dark and silent. The Hat was much too big for her and covered her eyes completely. She waited, expectantly. Nerves drained away and she now felt curious. Where would the Hat put her?

A little voice suddenly started speaking in her ear, causing her to start.

"Well, now, where shall you go? Not Hufflepuff, I think. There's a definite need to be noticed here, you'd be bored with the Huffs. You're a tough lady, no doubt about that, but a bit too self-centred to be a good Gryffindor. You're definitely smart enough for Ravenclaw, but on the other hand, there's a lust for power and a deviousness that's pure Slytherin. So where shall you go? Slytherin or Ravenclaw?"

Luella entertained the thought of being in Ravenclaw, of studying hard, being top of every subject, the most talented and powerful witch in her year. Nice. Very nice. The idea of her house looking up to her smarts was highly appealing.

The Hat was speaking again. "No problem. The Verts-et-Argents it is. SLYTHERIN!" The last word was screamed to the entire hall. Luella took the hat off, stunned. Too late, she realised what she'd done. Presented with a vision of herself as the most intelligent witch in the year, she'd turned it into a fantasy of being the most respected and powerful one in the year. Which was far and away the product of a Slytherin mind. She looked down. Her sash and hatband were green and silver. No turning back now. For better or worse, she was Slytherin. Which meant she was now facing the prospect of a fight to the death with Lord Voldemort. Blinking, she looked at Deanna, and got up, leaving the Hat behind. Deanna looked resigned to fate, but the look in her

eyes was one of fellowship. As she passed her on the way to the Slytherin table, Deanna whispered to Luella "I'm right behind you, don't worry." Rianne shook her hand and whispered "Well done, mate! Save me a seat, won't you?" Luella grinned and headed for the Slytherin table. All down the table length, Slytherins were cheering her. She idly wondered what would happen if they knew she was the Redeemer. Then she put it out of her mind. Voldemort's closest supporters had also been Slytherins, and they'd be rather less thrilled. She took a seat opposite Marlie.

Nearby, the red-haired girl sitting next to Mike, who turned out to be Rianne's older sister Katrina, better known as Kat, immediately congratulated her. "Well done! And welcome to Slytherin!"

Mike Lovegood followed up with "Yeah, nice one. Here's to your future as a Slyth." They toasted her, as did the Slytherins on either side, who introduced themselves as Summer Montague, third year Chaser and Jordan Foxworth, fourth year Keeper. It seemed she'd landed straight in the Quidditch head section.

Marlie was watching her slyly. "Well, well. So you are a true Slytherin, then." Marlie's normal extrovert and talkative manner had gone, to reveal something far more typically Slytherin. Luella wasn't at all sure she like the look in her eyes.

"It would appear so," she said stiffly.

Marlie merely smiled. "Well, here's hoping you make the best of it. We are counting on you." She lifted her glass again. "Here's to you, Luella Martin. May you fulfil your potential as a Slytherin. If you need my help, I will give it."

Mike turned away from hailing the imminent arrival in Slytherin of "Montague, Winter", to look at his sister. "That was very profound, Marlie. Has the Sorting Hat leaked some Ravenclaw into your head?"

Marlie just laughed and said, "In this house of pure-bloods, she'll need all the support she can get."

Feeling no more cheered than before, Luella turned to watch the rest of the Sorting, and found herself once more making eye contact with Snape. This time he wasn't concentrating. Merely regarding her coolly, and seemingly sizing her up. He had exactly the same expression on his face that Marlie had. Then came the most bizarre thing of all. Snape smiled briefly at her, before turning his attention to the Sorting again. Luella shuddered. She'd only been a Slytherin five minutes and already her House Master had taken a suspiciously sudden interest in her. She might be Muggle-born, but she knew enough to know that when a Slytherin looked at you like that, it could only mean one thing: that they had plans for you. This was rarely a good sign. However, the smile had not been an unfriendly one. For a brief moment, he'd almost looked attractive, in a strangely familiar way.

The Sorting had now reached "Parker, Daniel" (Hufflepuff) and "Peterson, Clara" (Ravenclaw). Soon it would be Rianne's turn. Luella found herself wishing things would hurry up. She was missing Rianne's company already. Despite the cheery welcome, she was feeling alone and adrift in a house where everyone else seemed to

have relatives and connections. She missed Rianne's comforting presence, craved an anchor to stop her from getting lost beyond recovery. Fortunately, there didn't seem to be many names left now. "Sharpe, Robert" went to Ravenclaw and "Spinnet, Alicia" to Gryffindor, and then it was Rianne's turn.

"Stormosi, Rianne" took the long walk to the Hat, seeming fairly confident. But only on the surface. Inside, all she could feel was a storm of turmoil within. *Stay calm, Rianne*, she instructed herself. *You can do this. You'll be fine. What happens, happens.* So saying, she picked up the Hat, sat down and disappeared inside.

As the comforting darkness enveloped her, so Rianne felt her turmoil disappear. Whether it was an end, or merely the eye in the hurricane though, she could not say. She waited for something to happen.

"Well, well, well," came the voice of the Hat. Alone of all the new first years, Rianne was not surprised or startled. She'd expected this. "Miss Rianne Stormosi." There was a slightly mocking tone to the way it said her last name which she did not like. "Where shall I put you?"

Rianne sighed impatiently. Still, there was no choice except to go through this charade. *You know where I must be. You know it must be Slytherin.*

"Now why is that then?" the Hat asked curiously. Rianne fought the urge to destroy it.

It is my fate, you know that! Where I'm meant be. Besides, and here her thoughts turned to her newfound friend Luella, *I am needed there. She will need me, surely you can see that?*

"She has other allies," the Hat replied. "Besides, you of all people should know that her fate is not necessarily yours. Maybe you're not meant to have anything to do with her. In any case, she's not my concern. You are."

Don't give me that. I could feel it on the train. She and I are linked. She may not be your concern, but she is, and always will be, mine. Now put me in Slytherin, damn you!

"And that's your desire, is it? Your one heartfelt ambition?"

Unlike Luella, Rianne was too cynical to fall for that one. Summoning up a desire for wealth and power, determined not to have the Hat turn on her and announce that with loyalty like that she'd make a good Hufflepuff, she put all her cunning to use.

Among other things. Let's just say that friendship with the Slytherin Redeemer's a gateway to the rest.

It worked. She heard the Hat sigh with something akin to disgust and disappointment.

"If that's what you really want. I had hoped you liked the girl for her own sake, but I suppose blood will out in the end. SLYTHERIN!"

The table erupted as Rianne got up and slowly made her way over. She barely took in the cheering around her as she took a seat next to Luella. All she could think of were those parting words of the Hat. *Blood will out?*

All doubts vanished from her mind as she looked up into Luella's eyes. Rianne had never seen anyone look so relieved.

"You're here!" Luella gasped, clearly delighted.

"Guess so," Rianne replied, amused. "Looks like we're stuck with each other. You OK with that?" Luella nodded with a grin before flinging her arms around Rianne. Smiling, Rianne hugged her back, her doubts temporarily laid to rest. *See, Sorting Hat, she does need me. I was just doing what I had to.* All the same, the voice whispering at the back of her mind refused to go away...

The Sorting was nearly done, with only four students remaining, Deanna, the red haired Weasley twins, and another boy. The name "Tyler, Deanna", was read out, and the girl strutted forward.

Slytherin or bust then, Deanna thought to herself. Even though she'd not been unaware of Rianne and Luella hugging, and knew that whatever happened, Luella would have at least one person looking out for her, that didn't mean she didn't want to be there too. *Lu will need me*, she thought as she sat down. *After all, she'll need someone who knows...* With these thoughts, she sat down and disappeared under the hat.

"Ah yes, Miss Deanna Tyler, the young Tal-y-Rhys Heiress. Slytherin for you, I suppose?"

Yes please. Was it really this easy? Deanna could have danced in elation.

"Even though there's someone in your year likely to involve you in the most perilous escapade of your life? Are you sure you want to risk the future of your family like that?"

Deanna sighed. Apparently not.

Sorting Hat, unless I help her in this, my family has no future. Get on with it. Sort me. Slytherin. Now.

The Hat was not so easily swayed. Deanna could feel it poking through her head, searching for gods knew what. She waited, tapping her foot impatiently, willing it to get on with it.

"My, aren't we hasty?" the Hat purred. "Sit tight, I'm not done yet. Well now, Miss Tyler, we have a very interesting situation here. You are certainly a powerful young lady, and I can see you want to be the best at everything. But I can also see a certain deficiency in the cunning department. In fact, your favoured solution to solving problems is to beat them into submission. Not a particularly Slytherin way of thinking, is it?"

Deanna wasn't sure what to say to this. She listened in growing horror as the Hat continued.

"There's also a worryingly selfless streak in here, isn't there? You truly care about that young Muggle-born, don't you? I think you truly would give your life to save her. There is nothing you would not do, no one you would not fight, for the sake of someone you care about. Am I right?"

Deanna didn't answer. All she could think about was how she wasn't going to make it to Slytherin after all, how she'd let both Luella and her mother down. What use would she be in Gryffindor? Or worse, Hufflepuff?

"Yes, all in all, I think you're well suited for Gry-"

Hold. She wasn't sure what to say, but she knew she had to say something. In no way was she going to sit back and let the Hat separate her from her friend and charge.

Are there really no lengths to which I would not go?

The Hat paused. Once more, she could feel it rummaging through her mind. Then she felt it stop. It seemed to have hesitated. What had it found?

When the Hat next spoke, its voice had changed utterly. It sounded almost... shocked.

"You are right," it said slowly. "There are no lengths to which you will not go. SLYTHERIN!"

Deanna got up and made her way over. That had been a close one. Too close. She felt she should be disturbed by the Hat's words, but Caitlin Tyler's daughter had been taught too well for that. To live without fear, you needed to be strong, and if you wanted to survive, you had to be prepared to cross the line sometimes.

"Hey, my friends," she greeted the other three girls as she took a seat next to Luella. "I made it."

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Nothing of further note occurred during the Sorting. "Vetinari, Lucas" also ended up in Slytherin, while the Weasley twins found themselves in Gryffindor. And with that, the Sorting was over, the Feast got under way and the Hall descended into chatter.

"Well, that was i-i-interesting, wasn-n-n-n't it, S-s-s-severus?" Professor Quirrell's stammering voice cut into Professor Snape's concentration. What d-d-did y-y-you th-th-think of this year's n-n-new Slytherins?"

Snape did not answer at first, too lost in thought to notice. However, Quirrell's stammer had a way of getting to him and he finally snapped back at the younger professor.

"They'll do," he snapped, in a way that left no room for argument. Snape had long ago mastered the art of the closed answer, made vastly easier by his not really caring for the feelings of lesser mortals, which was pretty much everyone except for Dumbledore and Melissa Lovegood. Quirrell had long ago been assigned to the category of rank inferiors.

Quirrell was not to be put off. "W-w-w-what d-d-do you th-th-think of th-that new young M-m-m-muggle-born?" he asked.

Had Snape not had other things on his mind, he might have picked up on the odd gleam in Quirrell's eyes. However, he did not, and the look didn't come back to him until it was too late.

"I was paying rather more attention to young Miss Tyler," Snape said curtly. "It's the first time ever that I've seen the Hat stop mid-call, hesitate, then call out something else entirely."

"Nearly a G-g-gryffindor?" Quirrell asked wryly.

This time, Snape fixed Quirrell with his fiercest glare. Quirrell quailed in fear.

"I don't believe, Samael, that Miss Tyler's inner nature is any of your concern. She is Slytherin. That is enough." He got to his feet. "I have some research to do. I shall see you tomorrow at the staff meeting. Good evening." With that, he swept out.

So it was that no one noticed Professor Quirrell staring surreptitiously at Luella with a very strange look in his eyes indeed.

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Chapter Five: The Master of Potions

The first few days passed smoothly. The other Slytherins appeared to be friendly enough. No one had yet taunted Luella for being Muggle-born, nor had Deanna been picked on for being fatherless. Evidently, Debra, Kat and Mike were keeping their word and looking out for them. Anyone who fancied their chances on the Quidditch squad couldn't afford to annoy Kat or Mike, while Debra had the uncanny knack of silencing the entire Common Room with a single glance. It helped that Debra had, as rumoured, been made a prefect at the feast.

Sharing a dormitory with three other girls was proving somewhat fraught. Deanna and Marlene still spoke to each other only when they had to, which proved somewhat irritating for the dorm's other occupants. However, Rianne was perfectly friendly to them all, and Marlene was showing Luella no overt hostility. In fact, she was going out of her way to be helpful. Her motive for this was soon apparent, as Luella discovered after their first History of Magic lesson.

Marlene had gently guided Luella aside for a brief chat. Luella's suspicions were not assuaged by Marlene's apparently friendly manner.

"So you're a true Slytherin, then."

Luella sighed, her heart sinking. Best to adopt Deanna's approach, she decided.

"Obviously, or the Hat wouldn't have put me here. Your point being?"

Marlene just smiled mysteriously. "Interesting that you produce our house emblem the first time you even pick up a wand, then end up here."

Luella shrugged. "Obvious, I'd have thought. My subconscious wanted to be Slytherin so that's what came out the wand. What else could it be?" She was determined not to give anything away.

Again that same strange little smile from Marlene. "Is that what Mrs. Tyler told you? Oh well, then, if that's what she said... She knows more about these things than I do, I dare say."

Luella by this time was feeling quite uncomfortable. "Marlene, if there's something you want to tell me, then get on with it. You're beginning to freak me out."

Marlene shook her head. "Nothing of importance. Just that..." She leant closer and lowered her voice. "If you ever need my help, for any reason at all... I will give it. Promise."

Luella regarded her with suspicion. It was evident Marlene's mother had told her everything. But why? She wasn't so naive as to believe that Marlene was acting out of altruism here.

"Can I hold you to that?" she asked carefully.

"You have my word as a Slytherin. I swear it on the Great Serpent."

"The what?"

"Our house emblem." Marlene explained. "It's also our most sacred, unbreakable oath. It's said if you break an oath sworn on the Great Serpent, the Serpent itself will come for you."

"Scary."

"Too right, I hate snakes." Marlene shuddered, glancing nervously around as if she expected the Slytherin Serpent itself to be lurking around the corner.

"Pretty bad luck to get put in the Serpent House then, wasn't it?" Luella commented wryly.

"It was rather!" Marlie laughed. "Come on, it's Transfiguration next. I've been really looking forward to that one, I want to learn how to turn Mike into a frog."

Transfiguration proved to be something of a disappointment. Professor McGonagall began the lesson interestingly enough, with a speech on the glory of transforming.

"Welcome to Transfiguration. This is the class where you will eventually learn how to achieve that famous magical speciality of turning your fellow students into frogs."

Laughter followed this. It seemed many of the students had had the same idea as Marlene. The Weasley twins in particular had been talking earlier about their older brother Percy, and how they'd like to transfigure him into a particularly lowly specimen of pond fauna.

"Then drop him down the back of someone else's robes." Fred grinned at Marlie. Marlie said nothing, just turned away with her nose in the air.

Professor McGonagall continued, "However, that is a long way off, and I do not expect any of you to be learning that until you reach sixth year." A groan of disappointment spread across the classroom. The Weasleys in particular looked most fed up. Evidently Percy Weasley was safe for the time being. Luella heard George (or was it Fred?) muttering "Bloody hell, by the time we learn it, he'll have left."

"It is very advanced magic, and I do not believe any of you are capable of it just yet. It is best left until you are all much older. However, I have no doubt most of you will achieve it in time. Maybe some of you will even reach the pinnacle of Transfiguration and become Animages."

At this, Marlie's hand shot into the air. Professor McGonagall noticed her and said "Yes, Miss Lovegood?"

"Miss, what's an Animage?"

Professor McGonagall looked a little annoyed, but there was a certain amount of pleasure there that someone was taking an interest. "Well, I was going to leave this for the OWL syllabus, but I don't see why a brief introduction to Animagism is inappropriate. An Animage, Lovegood, is a witch or wizard who can transform themselves into an animal. This is an incredibly difficult and complicated piece of magic, taking years to learn and master effectively. A great deal of skill is involved and there is much potential for things to go wrong before it is mastered. The transformation itself, once mastered, however, can be performed without a wand and can be done at any time in any place. It is a very useful ability to have and has saved many lives. However, it has also proved very damaging for people who don't know they are dealing with Animages, so they all have to register with the Ministry, stating what animal they transform into and what its markings are. So no one can use Animagism to spy on others." Professor McGonagall said sternly, looking at the rows of disappointed students. Luella glanced at the Weasleys, who were clearly contemplating the possibilities of being able to transform into an animal.

Marlene looked fascinated. She raised her hand, intent on asking another question.

"Professor, how do you choose what animal you're going to be?"

"The short answer to that, Miss Lovegood, is that you don't. The animal chooses you. Or rather, the animal you become reflects your deepest inner nature. There are many stories of disappointed Animages who wanted to be a lion or a wolf, but ended up as spiders or leeches." The entire class sounded revolted.

Luella recalled reading her Hogwarts prospectus. Professor McGonagall had been described as a registered Animaga. Tentatively, she raised her hand. Professor McGonagall nodded in her direction.

"Professor, aren't you an Animaga? What do you transform into? If you don't mind my asking."

"I don't mind at all, Miss Martin. I usually save this for my OWL students, but if you all want to see my transformation..."

The class assented. Everyone was paying attention. Professor McGonagall stepped into full view, took a deep breath and transformed. The class gasped. Where Professor McGonagall had been was a small tabby cat with eye markings closely resembling Professor McGonagall's spectacles. Marlene looked awestruck. Some of the Gryffindor girls could be heard oohing and aahing, at least until the cat looked sternly at them. In a flash, the cat was Professor McGonagall again.

"Alright, enough of the demonstrations. Time for you lot to get some work done. Today we're trying a little basic Transfiguration to start you all off. You're going to be changing matches into pins. Everyone come and collect a match each. This is how it's done..." And with that, the lesson began.

Transfiguration was followed by a half hour break between classes. Taking advantage of the warm weather, the four Slytherins went for a walk in the grounds.

"Well, if this is magic school, I like it!" Luella was declaring. "OK, History of Magic is a complete waste of time, but Transfiguration wasn't too bad. My match was looking distinctly pointy by the end of it, don't you think?"

"Still a match though, wasn't it?" Deanna said sarcastically. "I nearly cut my finger on mine."

"Shame it was still wooden." Rianne said. "Mine was pretty much perfect, I think. Marlie, you did quite well too."

Marlene looked distracted. "Eh, what? Oh, pins. Bit dull though. I want to do something more impressive. I mean, why would anyone seriously want to turn matches into pins? Apart from Madam Malkin. I was more interested in Animagism. Did you see when she transformed?"

Luella grinned. "Pretty fantastic, wasn't it? Tell you what, we'll have to watch ourselves now. You never know if McGonagall might be around in her cat form. Least we know now."

"I guess that's why Animages have to register." Deanna said, "So they can't spy on people. Defeats the whole object if you ask me."

"But wouldn't it be cool to be able to do it though?" Marlene seemed lost in a world of her own. "Just being able to take on animal form whenever you want... I'm never missing a lesson now, I want to know how it's done!"

"Going to be an Animaga, are you?" Rianne asked. "Well, good luck. Let us know what you manage to turn into, I'd like to know if you're around."

"Long as you don't end up as a lizard or something. Or a cockroach." Deanna was sneering a little. The tone of her voice was not lost on Marlene.

"The only cockroaches you'll be seeing around me are the ones that were once people who annoyed me." Marlene responded tartly. "Trust me, there will come a time, Miss I'm-going-to-be-a-famous-Auror, when you will wish you could transform!"

Luella sensed a fight in waiting. Hastily changing the subject, she asked, "Anyone know what we've got next?"

Rianne rummaged in her bag for her timetable. "Charms with the Ravenclaws. Then lunch. After that," she paused suddenly. A pleased look crept onto her face. "Potions with the Gryffindors. We've got Snape."

Deanna grimaced. "Oh gods. Not him. He's a right git, from what I've heard."

Marlene nodded. "For once I agree with you. Mike's told me all about Snapey and he's an evil bastard from what I can tell. Apparently he's really easy on Slytherins though, so we're safe."

Rianne was looking rather shocked. "You shouldn't be saying things like that about him, he's a teacher! And our House Master, don't forget! We should show him respect."

Deanna and Marlene were giving her very strange looks indeed.

"Ri," Marlene said patiently, "I don't want to suggest that you're nuts or anything, but you have two older sisters, one of whom is the notoriously workshy Kat Stormosi. Surely they haven't put you off him by now?"

"You want to watch out there, Rianne." Deanna said, a gleam in her eyes. "You'll be turning into Debra next, the Head Girl in waiting. Honestly. Just because he's a teacher does not mean he's entitled to our respect. He'll have to work for mine."

Luella decided to defuse the situation. Rianne was looking distinctly edgy, and more than a bit annoyed.

"I think, Deanna, that Ri was just saying that since he's our House Master, it'd be good to get on the right side of him and not think of him as a second Voldemort or anything."

"DON'T SAY THE NAME!!!" Rianne and Marlie both screeched together.

"Honestly, Lu, you'll be the death of us one day." Rianne said uncomfortably. "No one says his name, no one. Except Professor Dumbledore. Saying the name might bring him back."

Deanna snorted. "As if. You wusses. Mum says his name. Reckons that naming something gives you power over it, and refusing to name anything gives it power over you."

Marlene did not look convinced. "Well, I'm not arguing with you, but I'm not saying it. I'd rather not think about him." She shook herself and glanced around nervously. "Come on, it's nearly time for Charms."

Charms passed uneventfully. Professor Flitwick started them off gently enough, with a simple Laughing Charm. Deanna proved to be rather good at it, leaving Luella laughing so hard she had to be taken to the hospital wing to calm down and was still chuckling to herself half an hour into lunch.

Any levity was immediately dispelled, however, by walking into Professor Snape's dungeon classroom. Dank, cold, gloomy and with cobwebs in the far corners, it was not an inviting place. The jars around the walls containing things best not described did not exactly incite a cheering atmosphere. All in all, Luella thought it was the best antidote to a Laughing Charm she'd ever seen.

Professor Snape himself was seated behind his desk, scowling at them all as they arrived. Even the Weasley twins looked a little nervous. Luella and Deanna took their seats in the corner furthest from Snape's desk, while Rianne and Marlie sat across the

aisle, on the same bench as the Weasleys. Marlene looked far from pleased to find herself next to Fred Weasley again, especially as there were so many slimy things in various states of aliveness that could be dropped down her robe. Luella could only hope that the presence of Professor Snape would deter the twins from trying anything.

Once everyone had settled down, Snape began to call out the register, starting with the Gryffindors. Most of them were evidently Muggle-born, as he made little comment on any of them, until he came to the Weasleys. He regarded them coldly.

"Ah yes, the infamous Weasley twins. I have heard much about you. Most of it unfavourable. I shall warn you both now, if there are any of your usual tricks in my classes, you will be most severely punished. Other teachers may regard your little pranks as amusing games to be tolerated, but I regard you both merely as arrogant rulebreakers. Be warned. I'm watching you."

The class was silent. Most of them were feeling just a little bit scared. The Slytherin boys were grinning at the Weasleys, clearly enjoying the sight of the two best known Gryffindor first years getting singled out so soon. The twins themselves however, seemed unmoved. In fact they were looking at each other in a way which clearly suggested that when they planned their next bout of rulebreaking, Snape was first in line. Luella didn't know whether to sympathise with them both, or start pitying Snape.

Snape began to call out Slytherin names. This took rather longer, mainly because he kept stopping to mention that he'd known their parents, or older siblings. "Ah, Miss Lovegood. The Dark Arts Destroyer's Daughter. And sister to our finest Beater. I'm told you have ambitions to be on our Quidditch team too. May you prove as worthy a flier as your brother. I knew your mother well too, if your mind is half as sharp as hers, you'll be top of the class in no time."

Marlene blushed slightly. Evidently she wasn't used to having her family achievements pointed out so publicly. The Gryffindors were glaring at her, with the Weasleys in particular giving her much the same look they'd been giving Snape earlier. Luella made a mental note to warn Marlene to watch her back, literally.

Alex Lynch had to go through something similar, as Snape commented on the Quidditch skills of his brother Aidan, last year's Slytherin Seeker who had evidently just graduated and gone on to play professionally.

Then it was Luella's turn. She didn't think Snape would dwell on her long. After all, she was just a Muggle-born, with no magical parents or sibs for him to compare her to. But she was wrong. Snape called her name, she answered, and their eyes met. For the longest time, they just looked at each other, saying nothing. Luella began to panic. What was the matter? Was Snape one of those wizards who despised Muggle-borns? Just as Luella began to fear the worst, Snape spoke.

"So you're Luella Martin. If what I have heard is true, we are to expect great things from you. I hope you will not disappoint." Then, just like at the Sorting Feast, he half-smiled at her in an unnerving yet strangely familiar manner for a fleeting moment. Then he moved on to Winter Montague, commending his Chaser sister Summer on her abilities and hoping Winter would one day equal them.

Rianne's turn involved her sisters being commended on their abilities as Prefect and Head Girl in waiting, and Chaser star. "Debra tells me you're more like her, so maybe you too will one day wear the silver badge for Slytherin. I am sure you are more than capable of achieving it." Rianne went bright red at this, but met Snape's eyes calmly. Almost as if she was silently promising Snape she'd do exactly that. Rather odd, Luella thought. While fully aware that Rianne was making up for lost time by reading every book she could get her hands on and being consistently brilliant at every class she attended, to see her give that much adoration to a teacher was quite frankly unusual. And while she'd said to Deanna that Rianne was probably just covering herself and smoothing her path to the top by getting her House Master onside, Rianne's Snape fixation seemed to go beyond that. Almost as if it was... genuine? Surely not. Maybe it was just determination to do well. Yeah, that'd be it. No one could fancy Snape, surely... Although, if he washed his hair, got some fashionable robes and generally sorted himself out looks wise, he'd look quite suave, in a Heathcliff-esque sort of way.

Luella was jerked out of her reverie by Deanna barely acknowledging her name. It was obvious that Deanna was no more impressed by her house master than the Weasleys had been. Yet Snape didn't seem to notice. In fact he was staring right at Deanna as if he'd seen a ghost. When he did speak, it was with difficulty.

"So you're Caitlin Tyler's daughter." he said, licking his lips nervously. Luella was surprised. Snape seemed the last person to be nervous merely encountering an old schoolfriend's child. Deanna merely nodded shortly. Snape continued.

"I knew your mother very well. I've not seen her in years. Is she still an Auror?"

Deanna had apparently decided to actually speak. "She is."

"Is she well?"

"She's doing fine."

Snape nodded. "Good, good. I must get in touch with her again some time, talk about old times. She's one of the few from that era that the Dark Lord didn't get hold of." With that, he seemed to recover himself and moved on to the last on the register, Lucas Vetinari, who turned out to be another Auror's child and sibling to a Quidditch star (his Chaser sister, Laetitia).

At last, the register was over, and the lesson began in earnest. Snape laid the register book aside and began pacing the floor.

"This, students, is Potions. Some of you may be under the impression that, merely because there is no waving of wands and no flashes of light or puffs of smoke, that this is not real magic. However, let me tell you, you could not be more wrong." He fixed them with his steely gaze. Luella felt nervous just looking at him, even from the back of the class. Not even Rianne was this scary.

"Potions is an intrinsically fascinating subject. The bubbling of liquids, the hiss of steam rising from the cauldron, the shimmering of the potion itself, the feeling of

satisfaction as your master work changes from mere ingredients into a true thing of power... nothing can better the feeling of satisfaction as you survey your finished creation and know that there is a job well done. Most branches of magic are a mere flash in the pan as you cast the spell then nothing. Potions, by contrast, is a work of art. I do not expect any of you to appreciate this, however. Most students' minds are too blunt to appreciate the subtleties of this subject. Maybe some of you may be blessed with enough sensitivity to penetrate the secrets of potions, and learn to distil wealth, glory or death, depending on your whim. Maybe... unless you intend to be one of the usual dunderheads I end up teaching."

Luella shot a glance across at Rianne. She was gazing at Snape with an expression on her face that could only be described as rapturous. Clearly she intended to uncover every secret that Potions had to teach her, and more.

Snape's little theatricality appeared to be over. He was now instructing them in the art of mixing up a Sleeping Potion, a nice easy one to get them started, so he claimed. Luella, frantically copying down the ingredients and recipe off the board as Snape wrote them up, thought it all sounded rather complicated.

Once the instructions had been copied down, the class set to work. Luella and Deanna began chopping up asphodel root. Deanna looked rather irritated.

"What's up, Dee?" Luella asked her, guessing what was on her mind.

"That idiot." Deanna snarled. "Listen to him! Going on about how special Potions is! What use is any of this likely to be when you're facing several armed Dark wizards? I can just see the Dark Lord waiting while you brew up a Potion of Instant Agonisingly Painful Death to finish him, can't you? 'Oh, excuse me, Lord Voldemort, I'll be with you in a moment, I just need a few minutes for the wormwood to marinade.' Honestly, potions are all very well, but you can't beat a good curse when your back's against the wall. That's the trouble with academics, no grasp of life in the real world. Just think if Mum or Auntie Mel were teaching here, they wouldn't have us wasting our time on subjects like this, they'd have us working on defending ourselves, proper magic."

A cold voice came from behind them. "Interesting to hear your ideas on the Hogwarts curriculum, Miss Tyler, but sadly you are in no position to implement any of them."

Deanna and Luella both started. Snape had been wandering around the class observing them at work and had halted behind their bench. He spoke softly, so none of the others paid them any attention. However, Luella could see that Rianne and Marlene were watching them, concerned. Deanna had gone pale and was now silent. Contemptuous of Snape she might be, but she had no desire to get expelled, and was not about to risk Snape's wrath. Snape continued speaking in the same soft, menacing tone.

"You will find, Deanna, that all subjects on the Hogwarts curriculum are worthwhile studies in their own right, not just Defence Against the Dark Arts. I would advise you to work hard at all of them, not just the ones you think are interesting. You never know what might come in useful. I would have thought your mother would have told

you that." There was a slightly mocking gleam in his eyes. Deanna looked furious, but was concentrating on slicing her belladonna leaves up. She did not meet Snape's eyes.

Snape opened his mouth as if to say something else, but was suddenly distracted by a shriek from across the aisle. Marlene had turned on Fred Weasley and was calling him all sorts of names as she ran her fingers frantically through her hair.

Snape immediately approached them, a look of cold anger on his face. "Miss Lovegood, control yourself. What exactly has Mr Frederick Weasley done to deserve your wrath?"

Marlene was beside herself with righteous outrage, but calmed down sufficiently to land Fred Weasley right in deep trouble.

"Sir, Weasley's been putting roaches in my hair!"

Snape regarded Fred as though he were little more than the roaches he'd tipped over the Slytherin. "Ten points from Gryffindor, Weasley and a detention. Clear up the roaches, and get on with your work." Turning away from a seething Fred and a smug Marlene, who was even now poking her tongue out at the disgruntled Gryffindor, Snape returned his attention to Luella and Deanna. However, rather than giving any punishment out to either of them, he merely stooped close to Luella and murmured softly to her "Stay behind after the lesson. I want a word with you." before walking off to check that Lucas Vetinari and Alex Lynch were brewing theirs correctly.

Deanna gazed after him, amazed at his attitude. "Who does he think he is? I was the one putting his subject down and he keeps you behind! What a bastard. I've half a mind to write to Mum and complain. And talking of Mum, fancy him saying that about her! Implying she hasn't taught me properly, what a nerve."

Luella said nothing. Experience had taught her that the best action in this situation was to stay quiet and let Deanna rant. Besides, she had things to think about. Snape had really intrigued her now. Why did he want to talk to her? He hadn't thought twice about giving instant punishment to Fred Weasley, so why would he have bothered to detain her? Anyway, Deanna had been the one complaining. Talking of Deanna, why had he been so nervous with her when calling her name out? And why Snape's interest in Deanna's mother? How well exactly had they known each other? Curiouser and curiouser. However, Luella was far more concerned with what Snape wanted from her. What did he know? Why did he expect great things? There was only thing he could possibly mean, but how in the world did he know about that? The only ones who knew were Mrs. Tyler, Mrs. Lovegood, Marlie, Deanna and herself. She hadn't said anything, Deanna surely hadn't, and Marlie had given an unbreakable oath. Snape had apparently not had contact with Mrs. Tyler for some time, and he was hardly likely to have heard anything from Mr. Ollivander, an ex-Ravenclaw by all accounts. Which just left Mrs. Lovegood. Who was apparently the most secretive Slytherin around, which said a lot. She'd hardly be likely to gossip, but on the other hand, she'd no doubt want some kind of spy at Hogwarts, and would probably want a teacher in addition to her own daughter keeping tabs on the situation. In fact, the more she thought about it, the more sense it made. However, she had no intention of revealing anything about herself unless she had to. Who knew what Snape had in mind?

The lesson continued without further disturbance. Snape stopped them about ten minutes from the end to see how well they'd done, and picked Rianne to demonstrate hers. Fred Weasley was selected as a guineapig, something Luella thought was unlikely to be accidental. A look at Snape's twisted grin confirmed it. Sure enough Rianne's potion worked a treat and Fred was soon snoring contentedly.

"A pity we can't leave him like that." Snape commented waspishly. "He's so much less trouble when he's asleep. However, the inside of his mouth holds no immediate attractions and that snoring is frankly irritating. I pity those poor unfortunates who have to share a dormitory with him." Here he sneered at the Gryffindors. Picking up a small phial, he administered the antidote to him. Fred woke up immediately, and was sent back to his seat. Snape congratulated Rianne. "An excellent effort. Ten points for Slytherin for a perfect Sleeping Potion. I hope the rest of you will take Miss Stormosi's work as a shining example of how a potion should be made."

Rianne returned to her seat glowing with pride, oblivious to the looks of hate the Gryffindors were giving her. "Did you hear that?" she whispered to Luella, Deanna and Marlene. "A shining example, he called me! And I got my first points for Slytherin! I'm so happy!"

Not even Deanna could find it in her to be too sarcastic; after all Rianne had just won them ten points. However, she couldn't refrain from commenting on how Snape appeared to have taken rather a shine to the youngest Stormosi.

Rianne blushed at this. "Do you really think s- I mean," she coughed, quickly composing herself, "I'm sure he's just pleased to see someone who likes potions for once. Poor fellow, must be awful having all his students preferring 'proper magic' involving explosions." She gave Deanna a stern look which indicated that she had heard every word of her little rant earlier. Deanna flushed at this, but did not respond. She knew better than to annoy a member of the infamous Stormosi clan.

The bell now sounded for the end of the lesson. The rest of the class were packing up and leaving. Snape was talking to Fred Weasley, who was looking annoyed. Clearly he was having his detention arranged. Deanna whispered "Good luck" to Luella before following the rest of the class out. Fred walked off sulking, which just left Snape and Luella alone in the class. Swallowing nervously, she approached her house master.

"You wanted to talk to me, Professor?"

To her surprise, Snape, far from being angry, actually smiled gently at her and told her to sit down at the desk nearest him.

"Don't look so concerned, Miss Martin. I merely wished to ask how you were settling in at Hogwarts."

Surprised, and more than a little suspicious at Snape's apparent concern, Luella replied, "Fine. I mean, lessons are proving OK, I've made friends with the other Slytherin girls in my year, and everyone's been nice to me so far. I like it here."

Snape nodded, thoughtfully. "Good, glad to hear it. I did have my doubts about you, but if all is well..."

Luella began to feel uneasy. "Professor, was there something else you wanted to tell me?"

Snape appeared unruffled. "I gather Professor McGonagall informed you that your house serves as your Hogwarts family? She usually says something of that nature to new students." Without waiting for an answer, he continued. "Well, inter-house relations", here he grimaced painfully, "mean that Slytherin has had to be a closer-knit 'family' than most. I pride myself on leading a united house. As you are no doubt aware, I am head of Slytherin House, and that places me in the role of 'father' to all Slytherins here. I take that role seriously. And I just wanted to let you know that if you experience any problems here, if anything happens and you need assistance or just someone to talk to, I am here to help you as best I can. Do you understand me?" He was looking at her intently. His dark eyes were no longer cold, but strangely intense.

Luella understood him well enough, but this apparent concern worried her. Her Slytherin instincts were screaming at her to beware. She really wished that she'd bought a pocket Sneakoscope as well. Mustering up her courage, she looked back at him as calmly as possible.

"I think I understand you. But..." She paused, unsure what to say.

"Yes?" Snape pushed gently.

"Well, why are you telling me this? Why me, and not the other Slytherins?" Luella was feeling very uncomfortable about this. "Aren't you their house master too?"

Snape looked at her with a slightly patronising air. "I would have thought that was obvious."

Luella decided to play dumb. If he wanted trust he'd have to work for it. "Not really, sir."

Snape sighed. "Evidently you've not been told. In which case..." He looked uncertain, then seemed to come to a decision. "Miss Martin, think about your house mates. All of them seem to have noteworthy parents and siblings. Lucas Vetinari, son of esteemed Auror Marcus Vetinari and brother to current Slytherin Chaser Laetitia. Alexander Lynch, son of another Auror Carmela, with a brother who now plays professional Quidditch. Rianne Stormosi, with two well-known sisters here and parents who both excelled while they were students. Her mother's family are an ancient Welsh mage clan who were leading lights in Les Verts-et-Argents, her father's ancestors were powerful Roman magicians. Marlene Lovegood's antecedents are no less ancient, her maternal grandfather belonged to a leading magical family. Her mother is one of the Ministry's rising stars, and certainly the most competent one there, while her brother looks set to play Quidditch for England one of these days. Your own best friend is a child of a very talented and daring Auror who was a leading fighter against Voldemor- sorry, He Who Must Not Be Named,"

"I don't mind hearing the name. Voldemort." Luella said defiantly. After all, one day she'd have to fight the man, and she wanted the edge. Deanna's words earlier had hit a chord.

Snape raised an eyebrow. "You surprise me. Few eleven year olds can bear to hear the name of one so feared. Very well. Deanna's mother was a leading fighter against Voldemort and a member of a highly prominent magical family. Virtually every single one of your housemates has a magical pedigree second to none. You, however..." He cleared his throat. "You are Muggle-born in a house consisting mostly of pure or at least half blood mages. While I personally have no problem with Muggle-borns, you should be aware that others are not so generous. Particularly in Slytherin House, there are those who regard Muggle-borns as being inferior. So far it appears you have not run across this regrettable and divisive prejudice. Evidently, Debra Stormosi is looking out for you. You are fortunate in your choice of friends, Miss Martin."

Luella merely nodded. "Thank you, sir. But I know all this, Mrs. Tyler told me before I came here."

Snape looked surprised at this. "You know her?"

"Yes, she lives opposite my house. Deanna and I have known each other for years, that's why we're best friends now."

Snape seemed positively delighted by this news. "Excellent!" He laughed, stroking his chin. "Fortuitous for us all, to have you living so close to one of the Ministry's best Aurors." He seemed to suddenly realise he was saying more than he should and changed the subject. "But I digress. As I was saying, Muggle-born mages are unfortunately looked down on by certain sectors of our society, and Slytherin is sadly not empty of these types. However, I have no wish to see this divide my house. I've spent far too much time trying to raise Slytherin's profile to see it torn apart by petty and unfounded bigotry. I therefore want you to know that if you are ever the victim of this prejudice, or have any other problems, you can rest assured that I will do all in my power to deal with the offenders. I have my own reasons for wanting to see you succeed at Hogwarts."

"And they are...?" Luella's suspicions had not been allayed one iota.

Snape smiled enigmatically. "My reasons are my own, Luella Martin. I will tell you all in good time. If Caitlin has already told you, then I think we both know what we are talking about. If not, you don't need to know yet. Let's just say that you interest me greatly. I look forward to seeing you develop at Hogwarts." With that, he got up. The conversation was clearly at an end. Luella found herself shown to the door firmly but politely. Snape bowed slightly as she left and wished her good day, before closing the door behind her.

Deanna, Marlene and Rianne were waiting for her in the corridor. Marlene rushed forward immediately.

"Deanna told us what happened! Are you OK? What did he say to you? You're not in trouble are you?"

"No, I'm not in trouble. He just wanted to know how I was settling in and if I had any problems to come to him."

Deanna raised her eyebrow. "Most charitable. What's he planning for you? He's obviously trying to lull you into a false sense of security before pouncing. Maybe he has illicit designs on you."

Marlene choked with laughter. Luella felt herself go red. "Dee! I'm eleven, what kind of pervert do you think he is?"

Deanna just looked at her, clearly indicating that she would put nothing past Professor Snape.

Rianne looked furious. "Deanna, how dare you? Casting aspersions on him like that. I'm sure Professor Snape's just concerned for her wellbeing."

"You are very naive sometimes, Rianne. No one, especially not Professor Snape, takes an interest in their students for no reason." Deanna looked thoughtful. "Why did he want to tell you that, anyway?"

Luella wondered whether to tell Deanna all her suspicions, but decided against it with Rianne and Marlie there.

"Just that I'm Muggle-born, and he wanted to know if any of the other Slytherins ever used it against me. I think he thinks that I might get picked on."

Marlene smiled. "No worries there. Mike won't put up with that sort of rubbish and anyone who has any Quidditch ambitions will not want to alienate him. And would you want to pick a fight with him? By the time he graduates, you'll be in sixth year and hopefully will have enough personal power to silence any critics. Worry not, Lu."

Rianne looked like she was thinking. "But Chris Bryant's Muggle-born too, why didn't Snape want to talk to him? And he's not got anything like the connections Lu has. Although I think he's mates with Geoff Foxworth, so maybe he's safe after all. Plus I think Snape thinks the boys can look after themselves."

Deanna exploded. "So he's not just an arrogant git, he's sexist as well! Typical bloody male. Well, we'll show him, won't we? We'll show him Lu can look after herself without needing him!" She thumped Luella on the back. Luella grinned weakly. She really hoped Deanna wasn't going to make a habit of antagonising the Potions master. If, as seemed to be the case, Snape knew about her, she really didn't want to give him a reason to go running straight to Voldemort with that information. She still didn't know if she could trust him. He was, after all, Slytherin. However, she was also equally sure that Mrs. Tyler wouldn't have befriended anyone who was dangerous, and certain that Mrs. Lovegood would not have entrusted her secret to anyone untrustworthy. Frowning, she followed the others back to the common room.

Chapter Six: Quarrels Over Quidditch

It was later that evening before Luella managed to talk to Deanna on her own. The Slytherin common room, referred to as the Serpent's Nest, or simply the Nest, by its residents, was its usual hive of activity. Chris Bryant was attempting to set up his stereo system so he could demonstrate to a curious Geoff Foxworth and Alex Lynch what Muggle rock music sounded like. The rest of the first year were also gathered round, as well as a few older Slytherins who seemed strangely expectant about something in a not particularly nice sort of way.

"Wait till you hear this, lads, you'll love it! Def Leppard are excellent!" Chris was enthusing to them.

"This had better be worth hearing, Chris, after all you've told us." Lucas remarked casually.

Alex was grinning. "Yeah, ever since we got here, it's been Leps this and Leps that. If they're rubbish, you're in for a fight."

"They are rubbish." Deanna pointed out. "Typical bloke music. Give me Madonna or Paula Abdul any day."

"Paula Abdul!" Chris sneered. "Honestly, girls! Now where's the power socket."

"Power socket!" Now it was Deanna's turn to sneer. "No electricity, dummy! This is Hogwarts, everything runs off magic!"

Chris shrugged. "No biggie. I got my Walkman." He rushed off back to his dormitory, leaving several young Slytherins wondering what on earth a Walkman was, how it fitted into a trunk, and if it could do your homework for you. Marlene now had a fiendish grin on her face.

"This should be interesting." she murmured quietly to the other girls. "He's obviously not done much research yet. You can tell he's Muggle-born. No offence, Lu." she added hastily.

"None taken if you explain what you're on about." Luella said, puzzled.

Marlene smiled enigmatically. "You'll see." she said quietly, running a hairbrush over a purring Snowy. Deanna moved away, scowling, not wanting white cat hair all over her nice black robes.

Chris returned carrying a Walkman and some plug-in speakers.

"Is that it?" Winter shouted. "It's tiny!"

Alex just looked confused. "Where's the legs? How can it walk with no legs?"

Geoff looked smugly at it. "Obvious, isn't it? It's like a tortoise, the legs are inside."

Marlene just rolled her eyes and looked at Luella. Clearly she knew exactly what a Walkman was.

Chris was berating his mage-born housemates. "It doesn't walk, you do the walking and carry it with you! It lets you listen to music on the move!"

"Oooh!" The Slytherin boys were impressed. Rianne glanced over from behind her Potions textbook. She was curious but trying not to show it.

Chris was setting it up. "Now, you attach the speakers like so... that's where the noise comes out of. Then the tape goes in here, like this. Then you press 'Play' and you get..."

They got a piercing wail that sounded like a cat being tortured, before the machine went dead. Snowy hissed at it before running away towards the girls' dormitories. Sooty, rather more laidback, just turned over and remained asleep, as did most of the other Slytherin cats.

Chris turned it off in disbelief. "What's wrong with it? It's not meant to do that!"

Lucas was most unimpressed. "Well, if that's what Muggle music sounds like, you can keep it. I've got Charms homework to do." The crowd of first years dispersed, seemingly agreeing with him. The older Slytherins were chuckling to themselves and getting on with homework.

Marlene was laughing out loud. "Typical Muggle-borns! Don't you know anything? Muggle technology doesn't work at Hogwarts, the magical field shorts everything out! You've probably just ruined your Walkman there."

"Noooo!" Chris howled. "My beautiful Walkman! My 'Hysteria' tape! I won't be able to hear it until Christmas now!"

Deanna appeared to start. "You mean that wasn't Def Leppard? I thought they were meant to sound like banshees wailing and machinery breaking down." Chris glared at her.

Marlene, once having overcome her initial amusement, was rather sympathetic.

"Don't worry, mate. I'll see if I can't sort out something for you. Let me look at your Walkman, it might not be that badly damaged. I'll owl it to my dad, he's a Muggle engineer. He might be able to fix it. And I might be able to find a way of playing Muggle tapes here. It can be my project this year." With that, she led Chris into a corner and began going over his Walkman. Luella, seeing Marlene thus occupied and Rianne engrossed in her homework, motioned Deanna to one side and led her up to their dorm, where they could get some privacy.

"What's up, Lu? Want to see if your Walkman's OK?" Deanna was grinning. "Told you not to bother bringing it, didn't I?"

Luella closed the door after checking no one was lurking in the corridor. "Nothing to do with Muggle toys. Snape. He knows, Dee."

Deanna was immediately on guard. "Knows what?"

"About me. He knows I'm the Redeemer."

Deanna was stunned. "How? There was only six of us there that day! I doubt it was Mum, she's not been in contact to my knowledge, it wasn't me, wasn't you, Ollivander's a Ravenclaw so wouldn't know the legend, which just leaves..." She stopped. Her face went cold.

"Marlie. It was her, must have been! Little sneak, I'll bloody kill her." She turned to the door, furious.

"Deanna, wait!" Deanna hesitated. Luella was determined not to let this get out of hand.

"Deanna, it couldn't have been Marlie, she's not had time! When has she been out of our sight since she got here? Tonight's probably the first time she's not been with one of us. It was probably her mother. You know what Mrs. Lovegood is like, she trusts no one and has to know everything that's going on. She's probably enlisted Snape to keep tabs on us."

Deanna laughed shortly. "Auntie Mel trusts Snape? She's more naive than I thought then. Or she's losing her touch. If anyone here's an ex-Death Eater, it's ol' Snape-eyes."

Luella felt uncomfortable. Deanna was absolutely right, if anyone looked the Death Eater type, it was Snape. And yet, would Mrs. Lovegood really have enlisted the aid of a Death Eater? She told Deanna this.

Deanna shrugged. "OK. Be naive if you want to. But I'm carrying my Sneakoscope with me from now on."

The following morning was a fine breezy September day, perfect for their first lesson of the day, which turned out to be Flying with Madam Hooch and the Gryffindors.

Marlene was really excited. "I've been really looking forward to Flying! Almost as much as Transfiguration. I need to do well if I want to be on the house Quidditch team. I bet I'm really good, though. Mike and I are always playing it at home. My broom's a Cleansweep Six, it's really fast. Can't wait until I get on the team and can have it owled over."

Rianne was more laidback about it. "Flying's alright, but really overrated. I mean, Quidditch is about all you really use a broom for, isn't it? I'm looking forward to our last year when we get to learn how to Apparate."

Deanna hung behind with Luella, listening to them argue. She was most unimpressed.

"Listen to her, the annoying little snob. I bet she's never flown before in her life. I mean, I wouldn't mind being on the house team, but at least I'm not flaunting it. She's going to make enemies like that."

"What, like you, you mean?" Luella was beginning to get a little bit tired of Deanna complaining all the time about Marlene. "You should be grateful, you owe her a favour."

"Do I now." Deanna was sceptical.

"Yes, you do. Remember Potions yesterday? Snape was telling you off, then he got distracted by Marlene shrieking about Fred Weasley dropping roaches on her?"

"What about it?"

Luella grinned. "Marlie was talking to me about it this morning. Fred's innocent. Marlie just pretended he was picking on her to distract Snape. Now she's a bit scared they might try and get revenge."

Deanna grinned broadly. "Cool! I'd watch that."

"Good god, can't you give the girl a break? She got you off the hook with Snape, and you want to see her suffer for it? Where's your principles?"

"I have none, I'm Slytherin. We're the evil house, remember?" A hint of bitterness crept into her voice.

Luella lowered her voice. "Not if I can help it. I'm here to put that right, don't forget. Anyway, we're here."

They had arrived on the grassy area next to the lake. Twenty brooms were laid out on the ground. The Gryffindors were already there, as was Madam Hooch.

"Come along, children! A broom each and we'll begin. Stand by your brooms and shout 'Up!' "

They did. Nineteen brooms remained on the ground. Luella's just rolled over. Marlene's, however, shot straight into her hand.

"Well done, Miss Lovegood!" cried Madam Hooch. "Clearly you've had practice! Ten points to Slytherin." Marlie just grinned. Luella realised that Marlie's Quidditch ambitions were not unfounded. She had obviously picked up quite a bit with such a Quidditch loving older brother.

Eventually, all of them were mounted on brooms and flying at small distances from the ground. Luella desperately tried to control the school broom, which had a disturbing tendency to lean to the left, sending her round in circles. She began to see Rianne's point about it not being a major form of transport. Indeed, she was rather relieved she wouldn't have to use them often. It simply wasn't natural being this far off the ground.

Deanna whizzed past her. "Lu, this is brilliant! Come on, fly a bit higher, it's great! You can see for miles!"

"All I want to see is my feet on solid ground." Luella moaned. She'd never liked heights, and the knowledge that her own sense of balance and a bit of wood were all that was keeping her in the air was not cheering. Still, she had no intention of being left behind, and spurred her broom that bit higher.

Marlene was in her element. She was already executing a few of the more basic Quidditch moves, and showing off to a very impressed Alex Lynch and Geoff Foxworth. Deanna looked distinctly annoyed. Nor was she the only one. The Weasleys were also looking displeased. Luella guessed that they were planning something. Watching them closely, she began to cruise, determined not to attract attention.

She did not have to wait long. Both twins pulled out their wands while Madam Hooch wasn't looking, and aimed a couple of well-placed Laughing Charms Marlene's way.

"Marlie, look out!" Luella screamed. Marlie immediately sent her broom straight up into the air, out of harm's way. The charms missed her and slammed right into Deanna, who immediately creased up laughing. She was laughing so hard that she slipped, nearly falling off her broom. Luella reacted immediately. Kicking her broom into gear, she zoomed over to her friend and steadied her. Rianne, who had seen everything, did the same and held Deanna up on the other side. However, although they managed to prevent her falling, they were unable to stop her Sneakoscope falling out of her robes and plummeting to the ground.

"Oh no!" Deanna cried in between her giggles. "My... haha... Sneakoscope, heehee!" Marlene had by this time pulled her broom round and was watching from above. Seeing the small silvery object fall, she was immediately on its trail, not taking her eyes off it. The entire class froze, watching intently. Marlie was in real danger of crashing. However, about a metre from the ground, she snatched the Sneakoscope up and landed safely. The students breathed again.

Rianne and Luella, once they'd recovered immediately began clapping. "Well done, Marlie!" Luella cried.

"Damn, Lovegood, you're good!" Rianne shouted. Even Deanna was impressed, albeit grudgingly.

"She was *snicker* lucky." Deanna shrugged, still holding grimly on despite the magically induced laughter.

Madam Hooch had arrived on the scene. She did not look happy. "Weasley! Weasley! I saw that! You do not cast spells on fellow students when they are on brooms! Twenty points from Gryffindor and a detention each! Are you alright, Miss Tyler?"

Deanna nodded weakly. Madam Hooch performed the counter charm, and they all descended to the ground. They were met as they landed by Professor Snape, who had

been watching from a window and had apparently seen everything. His face was a mask of cold, terrifying, fury.

"Well, well. Mr. Frederick and Mr. George Weasley. I am beginning to see rather too much of you these days. Madam Hooch, I trust you have already punished these two?"

Madam Hooch nodded. "Ten points deducted each and a detention for each of them, Professor."

Snape seemed satisfied. "Excellent. Miss Tyler, are you recovered?"

Deanna nodded. "Yes sir, I'm fine now."

"I am very glad to hear it. You boys," here he turned to the Weasleys, "may find this difficult to believe, but I do not relish the prospect of writing to students' parents telling them their offspring have been injured or even killed while at Hogwarts. I do not wish to hear of either of you endangering the life of another student again. Miss Tyler nearly fell off her broom thanks to your little stunt, and could have been seriously injured. Be very careful. I'm watching you two closely." Snape's face was terrifying to behold. Even Deanna was quelled into submission. He turned his attention to Rianne and Luella.

"Your quick thinking and flying skills almost certainly saved your friend's life. Five points each to Slytherin. However, as for you, Miss Lovegood..." He turned to Marlie with his eyes blazing. "What were you thinking of? Clearly, your association with top Quidditch players has given you ideas above your station as to your flying skills. What exactly was so important as to cause you to go into that dive? You could have been seriously hurt."

Marlene, pale and trembling, held out the Sneakoscope. "It was this, sir. It fell out of Deanna's robes. I didn't want it to get broken, sir." As she said this, she began to realise how ridiculous this sounded. She looked away, reddening, unable to bear Snape's gaze.

Snape took the Sneakoscope from her and held it in his hand, looking at it. It remained motionless. They all held their breath, waiting for his reaction.

When Snape spoke again, his voice was soft. None of them were fooled as to this. Snape was far more dangerous when soft-spoken.

"Do you really think this toy is worth risking your life for, Lovegood?"

Marlie whispered "No, sir."

"Then you will understand why I am taking five points from Slytherin and giving you a detention. You will be in my office tonight at seven o'clock. Miss Tyler, your Sneakoscope." He handed it back to her and left without a word. Marlie just hung her head and tried not to cry.

Madam Hooch interrupted the silence. "Well, seeing as the lesson is nearly finished, you had better all get going and have some time to yourselves. I think we could all do with a breather. Weasley, Weasley, stay here, I need to arrange your detentions. The rest of you, dismissed."

At seven o'clock that night, a trembling, sick, Marlie Lovegood left the Nest and headed for Snape's dungeon classroom. It wasn't far. Marlie had always prided herself on her law-abiding nature, and now having to do a detention had seriously worried her. Particularly as it involved Snape. Apparently Fred Weasley's detention had involved amputating tarantula legs then removing the hair. Without magic. Marlene, having seen some of the things decorating Snape's classroom, hardly dared think what he'd have her doing. So long as it didn't involve snakes.

She knocked on the door and heard Snape answer "Enter." She pushed the door open falteringly and came face to face with the Slytherin Quidditch captain and Beater, fourth year Marcus Flint, who was sitting across the desk from Snape.

"Sit down, Miss Lovegood." Snape said calmly. "No doubt you two are already aware of each other, but I will introduce you anyway. Miss Lovegood, this is Marcus Flint, fourth year, Beater and Slytherin's Captain of Quidditch. Flint, this is Marlene Lovegood, a Slytherin first year."

"Mike's sister. I've heard of you. Mike reckons you want to be Seeker some day." Flint growled.

"Maybe sooner than you think." Snape said softly. "Miss Lovegood, please familiarise Flint with the events that led to you being here this evening."

Marlene was now thoroughly confused. Surely it was not usual practice for Quidditch captains to sit in on detentions? However, given that anything was preferable to grating snakeskin or milking cobras, she launched into a full rendition of that morning's flying lesson. A very full rendition, involving much detail of exactly how fast she'd avoided the Weasleys' hex, and how narrowly she'd managed to catch the Sneakoscope.

"I thought it was going to hit the ground. In fact, I thought *I* was! But I was able to tease enough speed out of the broom, pull up and grab the Sneakoscope out of the air just in time." Marlene finished, quite out of breath.

Snape nodded towards Flint. "You see? Despite the inevitable exaggerations, the story is true enough. She was able to catch a small, fast-falling and very difficult to see object while avoiding damage or injury to either herself or the broom. Now, I don't pretend to be an expert on these things, quite the contrary, but that was a very impressive bit of flying, especially for one so young."

Flint looked impressed, if a little sceptical. "I'll have to see her in action. But we do need someone now Aidan's left. The reserves are shocking."

Snape seemed pleased. "Well, you are captain, it's your choice. It's not quite dark yet, why don't we go out to the pitch and try Miss Lovegood out? I've taken the liberty of acquiring a broom and some of those things the Muggles call ping-pong balls."

And with that, Marlie found herself trailing after Snape with a school broom in her hand, and Flint carrying a box of ping-pong balls behind her. Out on the Quidditch pitch, Snape proceeded to sit back and watch as Flint threw balls into the air for her to catch. Marlie soon began to relax and enjoy herself, as she quickly snatched every single one out of the sky. Eventually, it became too dark to continue and Snape pronounced the session closed. Marlene landed her broom. If that had been detention, it was worth getting into trouble to get a few more like that.

Snape was looking at Flint. "Well, Flint? What do you think?"

Flint was grinning. "She's good. We'll take her. I don't care if she is a first year, I don't think we'll find a better flier in the school."

Snape nodded. "Excellent. I shall check with Professor Dumbledore, but I doubt there'll be a problem. It has happened before, after all."

Marlie was confused. However, it seemed she was no longer in trouble. "Er, Professor, what exactly is going on? What has happened before?"

Snape was smiling in the half-light. "Miss Lovegood, I take it you are familiar with the sport of Quidditch?"

Her eyes widened. Could he mean...? "Of course I am, my brother plays."

"And are you aware that this year, Slytherin House needs a Seeker for it's Quidditch team?"

"Yes. But what...?"

"What does that have to do with you?" Snape interrupted. "Simple. You have shown undoubted flying ability, a sharp eye for detail and very quick reflexes. We're offering you a place on the team."

Marlie's jaw dropped. Whatever she had expected, it had not been this. "Me? On the House team? Are you serious?"

Snape and Flint both nodded. "You interested?" Flint asked.

Marlie nodded eagerly. "Am I interested? It's all I dreamed of! But wait, I'll need a broom of my own."

"It can be arranged. Do you have one at home?" Snape asked.

"Yeah, a Cleansweep Six."

Snape turned to Flint. "Is that good?"

Flint looked ecstatic. "The second best broom on the market. Only better one is the Cleansweep Seven which Mike's got."

Marlie grinned. "I know. Mum gave it to him as a reward for winning the Cup last year. I got his old one. Fantastic flier, really smooth ride, great at turning."

Snape coughed gently. "If I may interrupt this no doubt fascinating conversation on the relative merits of various brooms."

Marlie and Flint both turned to listen.

"I do not think there will be a problem with this arrangement, but I still need to speak to the Headmaster about this. I then need to contact your mother and request that she send your broomstick. I think she will be quite pleased to do so. In the mean time, however, may I ask that you both speak of this as little as possible. I have no doubt that Misses Tyler, Martin and Stormosi will soon know all about it, and I believe the rest of the team have a right to know. However, I would prefer everyone else in Slytherin House to remain in the dark until I have confirmed this. I would prefer for the other houses to know nothing for the near future. Let us keep our secret weapon secret, hmm?" He smiled, leading Flint and Marlie back into the school. "It is getting late. You two return to the Nest, I shall let you know in the morning."

Marlie entered her dorm room with a swagger in her step. Rianne, Deanna and Luella were all seated around, doing homework and waiting to hear what their dorm mate's detention had involved.

"Well?" asked Rianne curiously. "What happened?"

"Was it horrible?" Luella asked.

"Did he have you gutting grass snakes or marinading adder spleens or something?" Deanna grinned evilly.

"Adders don't have spleens, do they?" Luella asked, puzzled.

"Not when Snape's finished with them, no." Deanna grinned.

Marlie beamed back. "No, no and no! So happens it wasn't really a detention at all! He was so impressed by my flying this morning that he wanted Flint to see me in action!"

"And...?" the other girls asked.

"And..." Marlie paused for effect. "I have just been made Seeker for the House team. The first team too, not just the reserves!"

"What?" "You're kidding!" "But first years never..." "Are you sure?"

"Of course I'm sure, Snape's speaking to Professor Dumbledore tonight!" she snapped. "Isn't it wonderful? I'm going to be a Seeker!"

Rianne and Luella were immediately full of congratulations. "Well done, Marlie!" "Yeah, the official House team, that's amazing! Good luck, you must be really good."

Deanna had been quiet up until now. However, she could hold it in no longer.

"Oh yeah, really good. It was detention, Marlie! You were meant to be being punished! You heard Snape this morning, you could have been killed showing off like that. And then you go and get yourself onto the Quidditch team? Well, Snape may be fooled by you, but I'm not. You're a snobbish, irritating little know-it-all crawler, and you're only on the team because you've got a brother on it already, and because you suck up to the teachers all the time!"

Marlie was struck dumb. However, she soon recovered. Furious, she yelled back.

"Yeah? Teachers' pet, am I? Spoilt stuck up know it all, am I? You'll see, Deanna Tyler! I won that place on the team through pure ability, nothing more! You're just jealous because you didn't get picked. And Mike had nothing to do with it, either. At least I've got a brother, and a proper family. At least I'm not some slutty Ministry witch's bastard!"

Deanna slapped her round the face, hard. She stared at her, trembling with rage and fury. "Don't you ever insult my mother again, Lovegood."

Marlene went red and rubbed her eyes. She looked at Deanna for the briefest of moments before running out the room in tears.

Deanna watched the door slam behind her with a look of grim satisfaction. "She asked for that," she whispered softly. "She deserved what she got." She turned to look at Rianne and Luella who were staring at her open mouthed. "Well? What are you two staring at? I'm going to the library." With that, she swept up her books and left.

Dorm relations took a turn for the worse after that. The atmosphere could have been cut with a knife. Deanna and Marlene were now not speaking to each other at all. Marlene was also rather cold with Luella, as was Rianne, who had taken Marlie's side. Rianne would talk to Deanna, but the four of them increasingly found themselves hanging around in pairs, Deanna with Luella and Rianne with Marlie.

Luella tried to reason with Deanna. "Dee, don't you think this is getting silly? You shouldn't have slapped her, no matter what she said. And you did start it."

Deanna was unrepentant. "She still insulted my mother. Anyway, why should I care what she thinks of me? I can't stand the girl. If it means I no longer have to put up with that petulant whiny little voice of hers, then that can only be a good thing."

Any attempt to make peace with Marlie was also doomed to failure.

"Deanna Tyler's had it in for me since we met in Diagon Alley." she fumed. "I don't know what I did to upset her, and I've tried to be friendly, but she just never wanted to know. OK, I shouldn't have said that about her mother, but I was angry! She virtually accused me of crawling my way onto the team and using my family connections. Well, I'll show her. Come the first match of the season, I'll show her who's teacher's pet." Luella decided to give up. Even Rianne was being most unhelpful.

"Look, Luella, you're a nice girl and all, but you're seriously misguided in your choice of friends, I think. Deanna's disliked Marlie since she got here, and now she's using any opportunity to pick a fight. She's been horrible to Marlie, who's not done anything to deserve that. Tell Deanna to sort her act out, because she's not going to win any friends behaving like that."

It was made worse by the arrival of Marlie's broom over breakfast a few days later, and an effusive note from her parents congratulating her on making the team so young. Deanna just got up and left her breakfast without a word. Marlie watched her go with a highly fed up look on her face.

Things came to a head on the way to Herbology. They had just had Transfiguration with the Gryffindors, and were making their way across the fields to Professor Sprout's greenhouses. Deanna and Luella were walking ahead of Rianne and Marlene, when a noise from behind distracted them.

Turning round, Luella saw Marlie being accosted by the Weasley twins.

"What was that parcel you got this morning, Lovegood?" George was asking her. "Looked like a broom to me, didn't it Fred?"

Fred grinned. "Looked like one to my eyes. Cleansweep, isn't it? Very nice broom indeed. But what's it doing with a first year? We're not allowed them. Maybe we should have a word with your house master, see if we can lose you those points you cost us."

Marlie looked furious. "Special circumstances. I'm allowed one."

"Oooh! Lovegood's allowed one, is she? Special, is she? Do siblings of Quidditch stars and children of Ministry witches get preferential treatment then?" George oozed sarcasm.

Rianne stepped in at this point. "Given that you're the sons of Arthur Weasley and brothers of Charlie, I'd hardly think so. Marlie's allowed that broom because she's the best flier in the year."

Fred bowed mockingly. "So sorry, Your Stormosiness. But you'll forgive us if we don't take the word of one of your little clan that there's no family connections being abused here."

Rianne's face was cold and impassive. "I'd never draw on my family connections to get power." she said softly.

George laughed harshly. "Bloody good thing too, we don't want You-Know-Who coming back, do we?"

Rianne's voice had gone dangerously quiet, almost Snape-quiet, in fact. "What's that supposed to mean, Weasley?"

Fred raised an eyebrow. "Just that with a mother in Azkaban, we can't afford to take any chances with you."

"Azkaban... how dare you? YOU TAKE THAT BACK!!" Rianne screamed. "You-Know-Who killed my mother, she'd never serve him!"

Fred and George had gone uncharacteristically quiet. In fact they were looking rather guilty.

"You don't know." whispered George. "Your dad never told you!"

"Told me what?" Rianne demanded. "I was always told that my mother was killed by You-Know-Who."

Fred and George were looking at the ground, distinctly uncomfortable. They both spoke at once.

"No, if you were never told..."

"Best you don't know..."

"Not from us, anyway..."

"We've got to get going, we've got History of Magic next and we don't want to be late for it." With that, they both rushed off as fast as they could, leaving Rianne pale and trembling.

Chapter Seven: More Slytherin Secrets

"Azkaban, she can't be... she's dead, surely?" Rianne whispered. Turning on the three of them, she snarled, "Tell me you didn't know this!"

Deanna and Marlie were both shaking their heads, stunned. "We didn't know, honest, Ri!" "Mum always told me Branwen Stormosi was a casualty of You-Know-Who as well, I swear I didn't know anything about this."

Luella tried to offer a crumb of comfort. "They were making it up, Ri. Just trying to upset you. You know what they're like, always joking around."

Rianne was not convinced. "That was genuine guilt in their faces! They thought I knew, but when they realised I didn't, they were too principled to throw it in my face. I mean, those two, actually wanting to go to History of Magic! No, it's true alright."

Deanna stepped in. "They might just be very good actors. Chances are they're laughing about it even now. No, there's only one way of making sure and that's to look up the trial records. They're in the library, Defence Against the Dark Arts students doing their NEWTs need to refer to them. We can check them out at lunchtime. I'll help you."

Rianne looked grateful. "That'd help. I need to know for sure. I can't believe my mother was a Death Eater, I can't!"

Herbology passed all too slowly for them all. As soon as break began, all four of them rushed for the library so as to locate the relevant files. However, their plan hit an immediate snag.

The Reign of Terror records were all located in the Restricted Section, which students were not allowed to access without a note from a teacher. Madam Pince, the librarian, was giving them suspicious looks, so they hastily went to a table in the deserted History of Magic section.

"That's torn it." Marlie said quietly. "How are we going to get in there? I mean, we don't have a plausible reason for looking, and there's no teachers who'd let us anyway."

They fell silent. Rianne looked close to tears. Luella felt awful. Marlie looked despairing. Deanna, however, looked like she was doing some very hard thinking.

At length she spoke. However, it was not her usual self-confident, brash manner with which she announced her idea. Instead, it was in a fearful, little girl tone of voice quite unlike her usual self.

"You could ask Snape?" she said quietly. All three girls looked at her disbelievingly.

"Snape?" Marlie could hardly believe her ears. "No thank you! I know I'm his pet Quidditch star," here sounded a distinct note of sarcasm, "but let's at least get a trophy or two under my belt before I push anything."

Deanna shook her head. "Not you. Luella."

Rianne and Marlie turned to look at her. Rianne seemed curious, Marlie disbelieving.

"Why me?" Luella asked, bridleing.

"Yeah, why her?" snapped Marlie. "If anyone, I'd've thought Rianne would be best at getting round Snape."

Deanna sighed. "You don't get it, do you? It's not a question of who, it's why! Lu's the only one with a decent reason."

Rianne still looked uncomprehending. Marlie, however, was beginning to understand. "I get it, you want Lu because she's..."

"Muggle-born." Deanna interrupted. "And Snape's already looking out for her on that score. What better reason could she have than to want to go through old trial records and find out who's linked to Voldemort and who isn't, so she knows who's likely to pick on her for being Muggle-born."

Rianne looked delighted. "Brilliant! Wish I'd thought of it myself. Even better, we've got Potions next. You can ask him afterwards, get straight on it."

Luella felt far from pleased to be landed with this. "OK. But you lot are coming with me. I'm not facing him on my own."

Potions passed without event. The Weasley twins were in a strangely subdued mood, and didn't complain, not even when Snape docked them points for not knowing that aconite and monkshood were the same plant. Meanwhile, the Slytherin girls were determined to be on their best behaviour. Rianne and Luella volunteered information every time he asked, winning a few points for Slytherin in the process. Marlie went so far as to give Fred Weasley a hand with his henbane leaves, while even Deanna was heard exclaiming in a loud voice how much she enjoyed Potions, how wrong she'd been about it before, and how she was now thinking of taking it as a NEWT. It appeared to work, for Snape was in a relatively nice mood by the end of the class. So nice, he didn't even give any detentions out. As the rest of the class headed for the door, Deanna gave Luella a nudge, whispering "Now!"

Feeling ill inside, Luella went up to Snape's desk. Snape glanced up and said in a somewhat irked voice "Yes, Miss Martin?"

"Erm, sir, I was wondering if I could possibly..." She hesitated. Rianne gave her a look which clearly said "Go on!"

Snape was regarding her with the resigned look of one well used to getting unusual requests from students. "Yes?"

Luella took a deep breath. "I was wondering if I could possibly have a note of permission to look at the Restricted Section."

Snape looked at her strangely. "An interesting request from a first year. May I ask why? I might add you will need to give a very convincing reason."

Luella gulped. "Well, sir, I was thinking about what you said last week, about me possibly being vulnerable because I'm Muggle-born. And... I wanted to go through old trial records from the time Voldemort was around, so I know whose parents were linked with him and whose weren't. That way, I know who to watch out for at school. I want to know who I can trust and who I can't." She smiled her most fetching smile. Please, please, let him be fooled, she thought. Behind her, Rianne, Marlie and Deanna were clutching each other in anticipation.

Snape noticed the three of them watching, and appeared to be considering them carefully. His eyes particularly lingered on Deanna and Rianne, then Deanna again. He turned back to Luella, thinking deeply.

"Normally I would refuse, but given your circumstances... Alright, you may use the Restricted Section. On one condition, that you tell no student outside this room what you are up to. That goes for you three as well!" he said sternly.

All four of them nodded. "Done." Luella said eagerly.

"Secondly", continued Snape, "this note of permission extends only to yourself and Miss Lovegood. If I find Miss Tyler or Miss Stormosi anywhere near the Restricted Section, there shall be trouble. Understand?"

Luella nodded, her heart sinking. Behind her, there were outraged cries from Rianne and Deanna.

"Sir, why not us?" Deanna asked, hurt.

"Because, Miss Tyler, there are things in the trial records that it would be better you two did not see. Things concerning your families and friends of your families that all in all, it is best you don't know about. I cannot explain further, but I have my reasons. One day, you will know all, when you are old enough to take it. Miss Lovegood's family is relatively trauma free, and so I am allowing her to view these materials. Thirdly, this note extends only to trial records and newspapers from the time of the Dark Lord. All other materials are out of bounds, and looking at them will bring trouble. This is an important privilege, and I don't want it abused. Understand me?" He looked severely into all their eyes in turn. The girls nodded wordlessly.

"Good. Finally, if any information you read in there should prove shocking or dangerous, I demand that you do not share it with your fellow students. Talk it over with me or another member of staff first. I do not want it all over the school that so-and-so's parents were Death Eaters, someone else's father is in Azkaban, or anything

else of that nature. There are many individuals in this school with buried secrets, and I'd like them to remain exactly that. Lord Voldemort is dead and gone, there is little to be gained by raking the past over. Are you all clear on that?" More nods.

"Thank you. In that case..." He produced a parchment and quill, and proceeded to write a note of permission for them. "There you are. Use it well, or you will find yourselves barred from the Restricted Section entirely for a very long time. Now get to lunch." With that, he dismissed them.

Outside, they immediately crowded round Luella to have a look.

"Wow, you got it!" Marlie whispered. "He must like you, Lu, he never does that normally!"

Rianne was enthralled. "So we can go and find out! Fantastic! Got to hand it to you, Luella, you're good. You too, Deanna, that was such a great idea of yours. Who'd have thought Professor Snape, of all people, would give in?"

Luella shook her head, bemused. Evidently, Snape was a softer touch than people thought. However, it seemed unwise to push this fact. "Let's not get carried away here. It only lets me and Marlie in. He must know about your mother, Ri, doesn't want you finding out."

"What about me, though?" Deanna demanded. "What's so bad about my family? I don't even have any, all I've got's Mum."

"Maybe that's the problem." Rianne said softly. "The rest of them are either dead or in Azkaban, or still on the run somewhere."

Marlie shuddered. "Don't. I don't want to think of You-Know-Who supporters out there somewhere. Especially if they're related to..." She stopped but the look she gave Deanna was unmistakable.

Deanna snapped, "Fine. Fine. I'm going for lunch. You two had better get cracking then, hadn't you?" She turned and headed for the Great Hall. Rianne paused to wish the two of them luck.

"I hope you find it. Or rather, I hope you don't find it!" she whispered, a haunted look in her eyes. "Snape's right, You-Know-Who's dead and gone. Why can't people just let the past lie?" Her voice broke on the last word. Tears in her eyes, she turned and followed Deanna.

Marlie turned to Luella. "I really hope we don't find it, you know. Must be awful for her, believing her mother was dead all these years, a martyr for the good guys, then to find out she was working for the other side all along."

Luella nodded. That, however, was the least of her worries. Deanna had also been prevented from seeing the records. What was her family hiding?

She turned to Marlie. "Come on, let's go. We'll have lunch first then get started. This sort of thing is best done on a full stomach."

It took much searching of trial records, most of which were exceedingly dull or incredibly disturbing, before anything of interest turned up. Most of the names they had never heard of before, although they did turn up a few cases which had been brought by Mrs. Tyler and Mrs. Lovegood.

"Your mother sure got around, didn't she? She's down as arresting Auror in so many cases. No wonder she's paranoid, she must have that many people wanting revenge."

Marlie nodded. "She's always telling me and Mike stories about her arrests. Always using them as instructive fables. I may as well skip Defence Against the Dark Arts, Mum's been drumming the basic principles into me ever since I was old enough to understand them. How on earth I managed to be able to trust anyone with her as a mum, I don't know. Mind you, Dad's pretty much the opposite, will talk to anyone. You'd like him. Your typical mad scientist."

"Your dad's a mad scientist? Cool! Does he have a lab with lots of flasks containing weird and wonderful concoctions?"

Marlie laughed. "No, you've got him mixed up with Professor Snape there. He does however have a garage full of bits of machinery and all sorts of gadgets. And Chris Bryant's Walkman, which knowing him, he'll probably declare irreparable because he wants the bits for something."

Luella giggled, causing Madam Pince to tell them off. They grinned at each other before returning to their search.

Marlie flipped over a page and gasped. "Oh my god, Lu! Look!"

Luella looked. "Lucius Malfoy. Arrested for the usual Death Eater stuff. Let off because he was under the Imperius curse. The Imperius curse?"

"Curse that lets you put someone under your absolute control. You-Know-Who put lots of people under it. Course, Mum reckons that there's a lot of genuine Death Eaters out there who just pretended they were under it to keep out of Azkaban. I don't know whether to believe her or not. Mum's really paranoid at the best of times. But that's not why I pointed this guy out. You remember I told you about my aunt and uncle who Mum doesn't speak to?"

Luella nodded. "Your aunt's a cat breeder, isn't she?"

"Well, yes. And that's her husband. That's my uncle by marriage, Uncle Lucius. And..." She drew a sharp breath. "Mum and Auror Alastor Moody are arresting officers! Wow, no wonder they haven't spoken in years. Mum must still be angry he got let off."

Marlie gazed into the distance. "The things you learn about your family. Well, I hardly know my aunt and uncle, and I've never had chance to grow fond of them. Mum's seen to that. So I've got Death Eater connections too. At least they're distant ones. Doesn't really bother me."

She returned to looking at trial records. Luella began flipping backwards through the records for 1976. "There's a lot here, Marlie. Any idea what time it would have happened?"

Marlie pursed her lips. "Well, Rianne was born in September 1977, so it must have been after then because not even Barty Crouch would have sent a pregnant woman to Azkaban, surely?"

"Don't know. Who's Barty Crouch?"

"Used to have Mum's job. Until 1984, then he got moved sideways because of some scandal involving his son. Then Mum got promoted. Apparently he was really anti-Dark Arts, really tough on suspects."

Luella began thinking. "OK, so she was sent down after Ri was born. But not that long after, because otherwise Rianne would know about it. So we're looking at some time between October 1977 and early 1980, say."

"OK. You take 1977 to end of 1978, I'll do 1979 and first six months of 1980."

"Done. I'll have a look at some back issues of the Daily Prophet while I'm at it."

They began searching systematically. It took the remainder of their lunch hour, and a good deal of their afternoon as well. Luella had by this time got bored of the trials and was now looking at various incident reports. These were rather more interesting, although she did find herself getting continually sidetracked. She had not been searching long, however, when, on 13th December 1977, she found something mentioning Mrs. Stormosi in passing. It wasn't anything to do with Rianne, though. It was Deanna.

Not Deanna herself, of course; Deanna hadn't even been born then. But attached to the document was a rather official looking photo of none other than Mrs. Tyler. Luella gulped and read on. Half of the report had been blacked out, presumably the gory details, but there was enough there to get the gist of what had happened.

Apparently, on 1st December, Caitlin Tyler had been abducted by Death Eaters on the way to visit her friend Branwen Stormosi. Outside the house, she'd been ambushed and swiftly removed to an unknown location, where a gang of Death Eaters had proceeded to torture her in an attempt to find out what the Ministry's next move would be. They had intended to kill her after, but she'd been able to fake her own death and escape, with the assistance of Agent Raven, presumably a Ministry spy. However, she was apparently leaving the Ministry and going into hiding to avoid further attacks. The report concluded that as Voldemort believed her dead, she would be safe, as long as she remained hidden.

Luella laid the paper down, shaking. This must have been why Snape had forbidden Deanna to come. He must have known about the attack on her mother and not wanted her to find out.

She closed the binder containing the papers. For a moment, she considered removing the paper from it's case, but it was protected by an Anti-Theft Charm well beyond Luella's abilities to undo. She glanced at Marlie, engrossed in a batch of Daily Prophets. No use showing her, not given current relations between Deanna and Marlie. Quietly, she replaced the folder and resumed looking at trials.

She was distracted by a squeal from Marlie. "Lu, look! It's here!" She pointed out an article headlined "WIFE OF QUIDDITCH STAR JAILED". On the front cover was a picture of a woman looking for all the world like an older Rianne.

Marlie was reading quietly. "Says here she was caught passing information to You-Know-Who endangering the lives of various Aurors, and may have been responsible for co-ordinating Mrs. Tyler's abduction in late 1977. Mrs. Tyler was abducted by You-Know-Who?" Marlie looked interested.

Luella hastily interrupted. "Yeah, I saw an article on it earlier. She was ambushed by Death Eaters but escaped. On her way to the Stormosis' at the time. Went into hiding herself after that. Can't remember what I did with the article though."

Marlie shrugged. "Well, not important. This is though. Mum arrested her - apparently after an elaborate sting operation involving another Auror, Frank Longbottom, and a fake Fidelius Charm. Mum pretended to make Mrs. Stormosi Secret Keeper for a Fidelius Charm that would protect Longbottom. That charm will keep anything secret, but the secret must be placed with a Secret Keeper. If they divulge it, the charm is broken. Anyway, Mum pretended to make her a Secret Keeper for this Auror. Gave her false information, which got passed to You-Know-Who. A load of Death Eaters acted on it, got caught and promptly grassed up Mrs. Stormosi, who got sent down for life. Wow. My mother is so cool." Marlie sounded impressed.

"I wouldn't say that to Rianne. She'll be anything but impressed." Luella warned. "Let's have a look at the trial record." They did. Nothing new was repeated there, but there was an addendum.

"Look at this, Marls. Apparently she got let out in 1984 after giving names of other Death Eaters and promising to abjure the Dark Arts. Then got sent down again virtually straight away after she met up with some other freed Death Eaters and tortured Longbottom and his wife for information on Voldemort's whereabouts, and probably revenge. Seems she wanted to restore Voldemort to power." Luella said grimly.

Marlie shook her head. "This is bad. Really bad. The spying was one thing, she might have been lied to, in the wrong place at the wrong time or set up. But the second time around..." She looked up, horrified. "Rianne's going to be so upset by this. But there's no doubt about it. Branwen Stormosi's a Death Eater."

Marlie proved absolutely right. Rianne broke down completely at the news and spent the entire evening curled up in her bed sobbing. Not even Marlie could comfort her.

Deanna, Luella and Marlie sat together on the other side of the dorm. Rianne had drawn the curtains on her bed and was refusing to talk to anyone. Marlie toyed with Snowy anxiously.

"What are we going to do? I mean, it's the weekend tomorrow, so she's got that time to deal with it. But we've got classes on Monday, what do we do then? She's in no state to go to any of them. But she'll get in real trouble if she doesn't go. Questions will be asked." She looked worried sick, although more about them getting found out than about anything else.

"We could tell people she's ill?" Luella suggested.

Deanna was dismissive. "Then they'll want to know why she's not in the hospital wing. And if she goes there, Madam Pomfrey will soon have it out of her what really happened."

They all looked very depressed at this. They were facing almost certain punishment. Snape had specifically warned them against upsetting fellow students with information about their families. Their only hope of salvation was that it hadn't actually been them who'd told Rianne about her mother. But then, telling Snape that meant that he'd know they'd been lying about why they wanted to go in the Restricted Section. It was a no-win situation. Luella in particular felt worst about it all. After all, she'd done the asking. She really didn't want to face Snape with the news that she'd taken advantage of him. It was funny, but even though she had no great liking for the Potions master, she felt guilty about having betrayed his trust. Somehow, she doubted he'd have done the same. There was something fundamentally honest about Snape. Vindictive, but honest. She remembered the previous week's Flying lesson, and Marlie getting told off for risking her life for a Pocket Sneakoscope. She remembered Snape taking the Sneakoscope off her, and it remaining still and silent in his hands. Shuddering, she felt tears begin to prick at her eyeballs. Maybe she wasn't cut out to be a Slytherin after all, if she couldn't even manage a bit of petty manipulation and rulebreaking without feeling this guilty.

Deanna was looking rather nervous herself. "We might as well face it, folks. We are in deep, deep trouble. Snape's going to kill us."

"And whose fault is that?" Marlie snapped back. "It was your idea to ask him! If we'd gone for a soft touch like Quirrell or Flitwick, we'd be alright!"

"Yeah?" Deanna was rather tetchy herself by this stage. "And do you have any idea how we'd have talked Quirrell or Flitwick into it? Because I don't. And it worked, didn't it? We got what we needed. OK, so we get in trouble. What's the worst that could happen?"

"Er... we get expelled?" Marlie suggested. "Snape writes home to our parents about it? I don't know what your mother's like when she's cross, but the last thing I want is for both Professor Snape and my mother to be on my case!"

Deanna was dismissive. "You won't get expelled. Slytherin don't have anyone else to be Seeker, they're not sending you home in a hurry. And I can't see Snape expelling one of us but not the others."

"Well, that's really comforting to know." Marlie snapped.

Luella glanced over at Rianne's bed. Sooty had climbed underneath the curtains and the level of crying had diminished somewhat. Evidently Rianne was feeling a little better.

"Rianne sounds less upset. That's one good thing."

Marlie shook her head. "This is all those Weasleys' fault! If they hadn't said anything to her... Why can't people just keep their mouths shut?" She was visibly trembling.

They were distracted by the sound of Rianne's bed hangings being ripped open. Rianne was sitting there, Sooty on her lap. She was no longer crying, but her eyes were still very red, and she looked pale.

For a moment, no one said anything, just looked at each other. Finally Marlie asked tentatively "Are you OK, Rianne?"

Rianne did not answer her. Instead she just looked at them each in turn and whispered hoarsely "Why did no one tell me about this?"

Luella didn't know what to say. Nor did Marlie, apparently, as she just avoided Rianne's gaze. Deanna was the only one to reply. "We didn't know, Rianne. We're sorry." She sounded genuinely remorseful.

Rianne shook her head. "Not you three. My family... Why did they never tell me the truth? Why did Dad never tell us? And Debra, she was five at the time, she must have known. Why did they let Kat and me go on believing our mother was some kind of martyr?" She was shaking, but not just with sadness this time. Now, she was trembling with barely concealed anger. Her voice rose to almost a scream. "Why did they never tell me?? Why did I have to find out now? Like this?" She wiped tears from her eyes.

Deanna and Marlie both looked very uncomfortable. Marlie spoke first. "Well, maybe they just wanted to protect you. Didn't want you to get hurt."

Rianne just laughed mirthlessly. "Yeah? That worked well, didn't it? Cowards all of them. And Dad! He's meant to be a Gryffindor, isn't he? They're meant to be brave." The tears were coming again. "So why didn't he have the courage to tell me my mother was a Death Eater?" She held her head in her hands. Marlie got up and put an arm round her, looking far from comfortable. Luella got up and joined her. None of them spoke.

At length Rianne looked up. Although still visibly upset, she looked purposeful. "Debra knows. She must do. She'd remember them arresting her."

Marlie looked terrified. "Rianne, please, don't do anything hasty. Please."

"Don't tell me what to do, Lovegood." Rianne snapped harshly. "I heard you three talking about how to stay out of trouble with Snape. Well, tough. I'm not keeping this quiet just to save your necks. I'm going to find my sister. Have it out with her." With that, she swept out of the dorm. The three of them looked at each other helplessly, then followed her.

The Nest was relatively quiet that evening. It was still early evening, not quite eight o'clock yet, and quite a few Slytherins were at clubs and meetings. However, there were still a fair few people around.

Debra was sitting in front of the fire with the other Slytherin Prefects. They were discussing various punishments they'd given out recently. Rianne walked straight up to them.

Debra noticed her sister's approach and turned to greet her. She had just enough time to take in Rianne's dishevelled appearance and begin a question of concern, when Rianne cut her dead.

"Why did you never tell me?" she demanded. "Why have you and Dad lied to me all these years!"

Debra went quiet. She looked around nervously, licking her lips. The other Prefects were all watching intently. Across the common room, Kat was scrutinising them, a look of concern on her face. She was sitting next to Summer Montague and Laetitia Vetinari, her fellow Chasers, who were also watching carefully.

"Rianne, when have we ever - " Debra began before Rianne interrupted again.

"Don't try and pull the wool over my eyes, Debra!" Rianne shouted. "I know now! About... about Mum!"

Debra's expression changed to one of horror. Across the room, Kat suddenly looked confused. Deanna, Marlie and Luella could only huddle together and watch.

"Who told you?" Debra said softly.

Rianne shook her head. There was a gleam of hate in her eyes. "Doesn't matter how I found out. Thing is, why wasn't it from you or Dad? Why'd you let me find out now? Like this? I had to hear it from a pair of Gryffindors, do you realise that?" She was beginning to get hysterical.

Luella heard Marlie say quietly. "Rianne, please, be careful. Don't do this." Rianne appeared not to hear.

Debra was trying to keep a grip on the situation. "Alright, Ri, I'm sorry. I should have told you earlier, I know. Let's go somewhere more private and talk about this."

By this time, Kat had made her way over. "Talk about what? What about Mum? She's been dead for years, Debs."

Rianne laughed hysterically. "Didn't tell you either, did they? Maybe they didn't think it worth mentioning. Didn't think we'd mind."

"Tell me what? Debs, what's going on?" Kat looked terrified. Debra just looked guilty. Rianne was calmer, but her eyes glittered with fury.

"Go on, Debra. Tell her. Might as well have one of us find out from a family member." She paused. Debra looked fearfully from one to the other. The entire common room was listening intently. Some looked quite expectant.

Kat had a look of utter confusion and quiet desperation on her face. "Debra, what is it? Why's Rianne so upset?"

Rianne looked almost jubilant. "Yes, Debra, tell her why I'm so upset. Go on, I dare you. If you don't, I will."

Debra finally looked them both in the eyes. There was a pained, haunted look in her eyes. "Please, both of you, please understand. Dad and I, we did it for the best. Dad didn't want you having to bear the shame of knowing..." She hesitated and looked into the flames.

"Know what?" Kat asked, a look of dread in her eyes. Debra just hung her head.

Rianne turned on the middle Stormosi, wild-eyed and near breaking point. "They didn't want us knowing that our mother's not dead."

Kat stared in shock. "Not dead? But then... where is she?"

Rianne had a rictus grin on her face, the firelight dancing on her cheek making her look like some ancient death goddess. "She's in Azkaban, Kat." she said sweetly. "Our dear father and sister", here she shot an evil look at Debra, "didn't think it worth mentioning that she was working for You-Know-Who. Our sainted mother who we've both revered all our lives as a martyr for good against evil was really a Death Eater all along! And our father never had the guts to tell us!" Her voice rose to a scream as she shouted the last two sentences for all the common room to hear. All over the room, Slytherins were turning away. Some looked embarrassed. Others seemed shocked. Some, however, looked neither ashamed or surprised, but merely smirked, as if they'd expected this to come out sooner or later.

Kat had gone pale. Turning to Debra, she whispered "It's not true. Please, Debs. Tell me it's not true!" Kat's voice rose to a pitch. She looked like she was about to break down now. Debra didn't answer. She just hung her head and turned away. Kat really did break down at this point. Sinking slowly to her knees, she just screamed "Nooo!" and sobbed helplessly. Rianne had a look of grim satisfaction on her face. She seemed beyond grief now.

Debra shifted uncomfortably. Pleading, she turned to her sisters. "I am so sorry." she whispered softly. "I am so sorry you found out like this. Please understand, we thought it was for the best, at least Dad did. Took me aside after she was sentenced, made me promise never to tell either of you. Told me we had to pretend she'd died, that it was better that way. That he didn't want you growing up having to deal with what she really was. That he'd tell you both when you were old enough to take it. I'm so sorry, I really am."

Rianne was still seething. "Is that all you can say? You're sorry? Your secrecy has torn our family apart, and you're sorry? Look at Kat, look what you've done to her! To me!"

Debra was about to speak, when she seemed to notice something and shut up immediately. Behind her, Luella heard the common room door close, and everyone in the room turn to look as one. Gulping, Luella turned to see who had come in.

It was Professor Snape. He took in the scene at a glance and strode over to the fireside. When he spoke, his voice was soft and his eyes flashed dangerously.

"Would someone be so good as to tell me what the meaning of all this commotion is?"

No one answered. As one, the entire room looked at Debra. She looked at Snape, fear in her eyes. However, she composed herself quickly enough.

"Rianne found out about her mother, Professor."

Whatever Snape had been expecting, it had not been that. For a brief moment, he looked stunned. However, it was over all too quickly, and he turned to face Luella. Deanna and Marlie drew closer to her in terror and Luella quailed under his gaze.

"So", he said softly. "I give you a privilege and you abuse it. Is this the loyalty I can expect from you? You disappoint me, all of you. I had expected so much better. Especially you, Miss Martin. Of all of you, I thought you at least had more sense than to go spreading tales around." Luella did not dare meet his eyes. Snape turned away to speak to the Stormosis again.

"You three come to my office. I need to speak with you. As for you three," he turned back to the three trembling first years, "you will remain in the Serpent's Nest. When I have finished talking with the Stormosis, I will return for you. Do not think you will escape lightly from this!" With that, he swept out, the Stormosi girls trailing after him.

Chapter Eight: Picking Up The Pieces

Luella, Marlie and Deanna, not wishing to face the inevitable questions from their housemates, retreated to their dorm and locked the door. None of them spoke for a while. Marlie and Luella cuddled their cats, while Deanna just lay back on her bed and wished Spooky was a lap owl.

After a while, Marlie broke the silence. "What do you think's going on in there?"

The other two had no need to ask what she was referring to. Deanna shrugged.

"Don't know. Hope Rianne's not in too much trouble though."

Luella shook her head. "She's in an awful state, I doubt even Snape's going to dish out any punishment to her. I'd be more worried about us. You saw him in the Nest, he was furious with us for telling her without consulting him." She shivered, hoping beyond hope that Snape would have calmed down before sending for them.

"But we didn't tell her." Marlie pointed out. "The Weasley twins did. Surely Rianne will tell him that. I mean, she told Debra she found out from a pair of Gryffindors and Debra's got no reason to keep that quiet. Snape's not stupid, he'll put two and two together."

Luella shook her head. "That doesn't get us off the hook. Then he'll know we lied to him. Either way, we are still in it up to our necks."

"You lied to him, you mean." Marlie pointed out. "You did the asking."

"Less of that, Lovegood." Deanna snapped. "If Luella gets in trouble, we all do. It was a joint effort and Snape knows it. We're in this together."

Marlie shut up after that. However, she, like all of them, was pondering the question, what would Snape do to them?

Their agony was brought to an end around nine o'clock when Rianne reappeared. She looked calmer, if drained.

"Snape's in the common room." she said dully. "He wants to see you three. Now."

Without a word, the other three got up and left. Marlie turned to Rianne as they left and asked if she was OK.

Rianne shrugged. "I've felt better. Snape's not in a particularly good mood, but he's less angry than he was. I told him I found out about Mum from the Weasleys, so at least you're off the hook there." Marlie thanked her and followed the other two.

Snape was waiting for them downstairs. He did look less formidable than before, although not much. Luella couldn't help noticing how tired his eyes looked.

"Follow me." he ordered, then left the common room without a word. The three of them followed him, studiously avoiding the gaze of their housemates. Luella noticed that Debra and Kat were nowhere in sight. Like Rianne, they must have retreated to their dorms for peace and privacy.

Snape led them along the corridor to his dungeon classroom. He did not remain in the classroom however, but led them through the door behind his desk which opened into his private office. The office was smaller than the classroom, but no less bizarrely decorated. Everywhere were books, jars containing body parts of various creatures, and various flasks and phials of liquid. Perched in the corner was a black raven regarding them with a distrustful beady eye. It fluttered over to Snape and landed on his shoulder, nibbling his ear.

Three chairs had been set up in front of Snape's desk. Snape closed the door behind him, sat down and motioned for them to sit. They did so.

For a while, none of them spoke. Snape merely allowed his eyes to run across them distastefully. The girls just looked at the floor, none of them wanting to meet that gaze.

"Well." Snape said softly. "I have just had to endure a most unpleasant interview. Do you have any idea what your actions have done to that family?"

They did not respond. Snape continued.

"Uncharacteristically quiet, aren't we? I shall tell you what you have done. Two innocent young girls have had their view of their mother utterly destroyed in a single night. Katrina and Rianne have been severely traumatised by this. Who can say if they will ever fully recover? I cannot say what the effects will be, but they will never be the same again, thanks to this. They will never regard their sister in quite the same way as before. And I do not know if they will ever entirely forgive their father. In a way, I do not blame them. Quite why Alfredo Stormosi did not foresee something like this happening, I do not know. However, it is his prerogative to inform his daughters of family secrets and his alone! He will be most upset over this, I don't doubt. And as his daughters' house master, it is I who have the unhappy task of officially informing him of what has just transpired. It is not something I am looking forward to, believe me. Do you have any idea how much trouble you have caused?" Snape's face was a mask of fury.

Deanna's self-control snapped. "It wasn't us who told her!" she cried. "The Weasley twins first brought it up, not us! We didn't even know until they mentioned it."

Snape hissed at her. "Be quiet, Miss Tyler. It so happens Rianne Stormosi told me everything about your little plan, and the Weasleys' involvement. I shall certainly be speaking to Professor McGonagall about them in the morning. However, my immediate concern is you three." He glared at them furiously. "What on earth possessed you? Getting illicit access to the Restricted Section in order to find out for yourselves? And what makes you think that reading it in cold print was the best way to for her to know that? Or that you three are the ones best qualified to break that sort of news? Why on earth didn't you think of going to a teacher? Any one of us could

have broken that sort of news gently, or at least kept control of the situation while we informed Debra and Mr. Stormosi." Snape stared at them, exasperated.

Luella, Deanna and Marlie looked at each other. Now that they thought of it, it seemed the obvious thing to have done.

"Sorry, sir." Marlie whispered.

"We won't do it again." Luella said quietly.

"We didn't think." Deanna admitted.

"That much is obvious." Snape snarled. "I thought all of you had more sense. At least you are suitably remorseful. In recognition of that, I shall not be informing your parents this time."

"Thank you, sir." they all murmured.

Snape continued. "However, I cannot let you get away with this scot-free. You deliberately and knowingly lied to a teacher in order to get into the Restricted Section under false pretences. You broke the conditions attached to the permission I granted, by telling Rianne about her mother without first consulting me, and as a result, the whole of Slytherin House now knows about the Stormosi's past. This is exactly what I wished to avoid. Doubtless many of them knew anyway, and Debra has enough personal power to limit the damage. However, there will now be whispers all around the Serpent's Nest. Like mother, like daughter, they will be saying, and the Stormosi girls will never be entirely trusted again. Katrina is not your responsibility, but you will now be called on to protect Rianne from the fallout of all this. I trust you will do so." They all nodded.

"An apology to Miss Stormosi would not go amiss either. I am also taking ten points each from Slytherin and giving all three of you a detention. In addition, I am barring you from the Restricted Section at all for any reason until you reach fifth year."

"What!" "But that's not fair..." "Suppose we need to..."

"Silence!" roared Snape. "It is highly unlikely you will need to use it in the course of your studies before then in any case. If you do, you will need to ask Miss Stormosi to go on your behalf. You three have proven to my satisfaction that you cannot be trusted to use it responsibly. Maybe when you reach your OWL year, you will have grown up sufficiently to be trusted. Yes, Miss Tyler, I know you did not use it. However, the entire escapade was your idea, I believe. And I have no doubt you would have joined your friends had I allowed you too."

Deanna had been about to object, but realised that Snape was absolutely right - given the chance, she'd have gone too. Instead, she chose to keep quiet and accept her punishment.

Snape appeared to have calmed down a little. "Well, it is getting late. That will do for now. We all need rest, I think. I will arrange your detentions at a later date when I

have the luxury of time. In the mean time, I want you all to think carefully about what has happened tonight. If it means you all learn from this, it will not be a completely wasted experience. Miss Tyler, Miss Lovegood, you may go. Miss Martin, a word."

Deanna and Marlie left. Deanna patted Luella's shoulder in solidarity before following Marlie out. The door closed behind them. Luella panicked. Why did Snape want to speak to her alone? She did not think this was good news.

Snape regarded her coolly for a while. When he spoke, his voice had slipped back to the soft-spoken sarcasm that struck fear into so many students' hearts.

"Well now, Miss Martin. Our second little chat since your arrival. In rather less happy circumstances. I am very disappointed in you. I had expected better."

Luella said nothing. Snape continued.

"Miss Lovegood it appears was merely swept up by peer pressure and acted as she thought was best. As for Miss Tyler, I am not surprised that she masterminded the whole affair. It appears she has inherited her mother's initiative and willingness to break rules. Not bad things in themselves, but for best use, they require more forethought than she currently possesses. However, as for you..." He looked her straight in the eye, and Luella, for the first time, met his gaze. She was surprised to read there, not just anger, but crushing disappointment.

"I thought you were better than that. Miss Tyler's idea it may have been, but did you have to go along with it?"

Luella felt her earlier guilt hit her again with full force. "I'm sorry, sir." she said quietly.

"So you should be." Snape said, an edge of bitterness creeping into his voice. "I showed concern for you as your teacher and house master, and you took advantage of it for your own personal gain. In the long-term, you will pay for doing this sort of thing, as you alienate potential allies and diminish your own personal power as a result. Your reputation will suffer, as will your own sense of honour, and if you want to achieve your potential, believe me, you will need both to be as strong as they can be. Do you understand me?" His eyes bored into hers. Luella nodded mutely.

"Good." Snape said. "Betray your enemies as you will, but never ever take advantage of a friend or ally. Being a Slytherin does not mean you have to be wholly self-interested. I will not be imposing any further punishment on you, but I wanted you to understand that. Now onto my next point."

He leaned forward at this. Luella sensed a note of urgency creep out.

"What else did you find out? Is there anyone else at Hogwarts that you have information on?" Snape looked keenly at her.

Luella thought for a bit. Should she tell him everything or not? Should she tell him about Mrs. Tyler? She closed her eyes and allowed images to pass through her mind.

She saw Rianne retreating behind her bed curtains and sobbing. Rianne screaming at her sister in the common room. Snape lecturing all three of them on their stupidity. Snape's look of pure disappointment as he lectured her alone. The thought of Deanna going through what Rianne had. Finally, Snape holding Deanna's unmoving Sneakoscope as he was telling Marlie off. These last two decided Luella. She had no wish to see Deanna suffer as well. And whatever else Snape might be, he seemed fundamentally trustworthy.

She opened her eyes. Snape was still looking at her intensely.

"Well, there were a couple of things. One was Marlie's uncle Lucius."

Snape raised an eyebrow. "Her uncle? Ah, of course. I had forgotten Narcissa Malfoy was Melissa Lovegood's sister. Although forgivable - I don't believe they've spoken for some time."

"They haven't. I think Mrs. Lovegood arresting her sister's husband may have had something to do with it." Luella grinned.

Snape, for the first time that evening, allowed himself a smile. "Among other things, yes. They never did get on. Does Miss Lovegood know about her uncle's past?"

Luella nodded. "She was the one who found the trial report. She wasn't at all surprised. I don't think you need worry about her."

Snape nodded. "No, probably not. And the other thing?"

Luella gulped nervously. This one was much more worrying. She wasn't sure how Snape would react. Still, nothing for it.

"Well, it was about Deanna's mother." she said, not sure where to start.

Snape started. "What about her?" he said sharply.

"Did you know she was abducted and tortured by Death Eaters?"

"That's in the library?? Where?"

"There's a Ministry report on the incident. Sir, are you alright?" Luella asked, concerned.

"Yes... yes, I'm fine. Have you told anyone else about this?" Snape asked.

Luella shook her head. "No one. I tried to steal the report but it's protected by magic."

Snape raised an eyebrow, but did not look like he was about to tell her off. "Very well, don't worry about it. I shall have it removed from the library. In the mean time, tell no one. Not even your friends Miss Lovegood and Miss Stormosi. I think it would be best if Deanna did not find out about her mother's past just yet. It would unsettle her, and she doesn't need to know. I'm sure her mother will tell her everything when she's

older, but until then... Listen, if there's a risk she might find out too soon, come and find me, alright? Tell me immediately."

"I won't tell anyone, sir. And if she does find out, I'll come straight to you, I promise."

Snape smiled. "Good. You are learning your lesson already. Let us hope you will never have to put it into practice. Was there anything else you uncovered?"

Luella shook her head. "No, the rest was about people we'd never heard of."

Snape seemed content. "Well, in that case, I suggest you return to your dormitory and get some sleep. I think you and I both need it. Goodnight, Miss Martin." He got up and opened the door for her. Luella wished him goodnight and went to leave. However, Snape stopped her as she passed him to go.

"Just one thing. I would like to thank you for trusting me with the information about Deanna. Your honour is not that far gone, I see."

Luella blushed. "Thank you sir. I'm sorry I took advantage of you."

"Apology accepted. Now get to bed. And stay out of trouble, I've had quite enough for one evening."

"I'll try to behave." Luella grinned. And with that, she left Snape's dungeon and returned to the Nest, feeling a lot happier than before.

Deanna and Marlie walked back to the Serpent's Nest together in silence. The air was tangibly uncomfortable. Recent events had pushed their own rift to one side, but having to be alone together, however briefly, had brought it back.

Marlie was first to break the silence.

"I wonder what's happening in there. Poor Lu, I hope she's alright."

Deanna bit her lip. What was Snape up to in there? If Luella was right, and he did know her secret, she could be in real trouble. Concern about Luella's Muggle birth had been a flimsy pretext to start with, she wasn't at all sure how it would stand up to intense scrutiny from someone as skilled at intimidation as Snape.

"Don't know. Hope she's OK. Maybe Snape wants to give her an extra going over, seeing as she was the one who actually did the asking. Don't blame him, I'd go nuts if someone I trusted took advantage like that."

Marlie looked dubious. "Is that all it is, I wonder?" She seemed to be thinking hard. Turning to Deanna, she said sharply "Do you remember when Luella got her wand?"

Now it was Deanna's turn to be suspicious. "What about it?"

"Well," Marlie said slowly, "I was just wondering if your mum told you anything about it. About what it meant."

"Nothing." Deanna said sharply. "She said it was just Luella half-remembering our house emblem. Why, what have you heard?"

"Nothing." Marlie said hastily. "Mum wouldn't say anything, except to say nothing to anyone about it. I was wondering if you knew what it meant."

"Well, as far as I can tell, it's just our respective mothers getting worked up over nothing. Just being paranoid Auror types, seeing Dark magic everywhere. Occupational hazard, comes with the job." Deanna said, trying to sound nonchalant. Marlie was beginning to worry her. Alright, she said she didn't know anything but on the other hand, she would say that, wouldn't she? Marlie was acting very suspiciously, and Deanna, for her part, trusted her as much as she did Snape. Less, in fact.

Marlie fell silent. She looked deep in thought. Deanna decided to leave her alone for now. After all they were nearly at the common room. Snape's office was only down the corridor.

They were interrupted by someone running towards them. It turned out to be Luella.

"Wait up, you two! I've forgotten the password!"

Marlie and Deanna sighed. Luella's memory for passwords was shocking. One reason they rarely let her go wandering around the castle on her own, especially not late at night.

She caught up with them, breathless. They waited while she recovered herself.

"Well?" Marlie asked, curious. "What happened?"

Luella used her breathlessness as an excuse to do some quick thinking. "Not much." she said, leaning against the wall. "Just that he was very disappointed in me, and didn't want to see me lying to teachers and breaking people's trust anymore. He was a bit hacked off with me. Didn't give me any extra punishment though. I was properly remorseful, so I think he felt benevolent."

Deanna smirked. "Told you he liked you. I reckon Snapey's soft on you, mate."

Luella was not pleased. "He is not soft on me, he gave me the roasting to end all roastings. It was horrible. Soft he is not. Let's go in."

Rianne had retreated to bed when they arrived, and they didn't like to disturb her. Marlie just said goodnight and also went straight to bed. Deanna waited until the hangings were closed before dragging Luella over to her bed and drawing her own hangings shut.

"Well? What really happened?" Deanna said quietly. Luella filled her in, leaving out the part about Deanna's mother.

Deanna looked thoughtful. "Snapey seemed rather keen to know what you'd seen, didn't he? Wonder what he's hiding?"

"I wouldn't know, Deanna. You are suspicious, aren't you? He probably wants to know what else we found out in case another incident like tonight happens. He looked absolutely shattered when I left. I for one do not blame him. Would you have wanted to deal with three hysterical Stormosis?"

"No." Deanna admitted. "But I still don't trust him. And here's another one I don't trust either. Marlie."

Luella rolled her eyes. "Deanna, if you're going to go on about her again..."

Deanna shook her head. "No, no, this is genuinely suss." She proceeded to recount what Marlie had said in the corridor.

Luella was troubled by this. She remembered her own conversation with Marlie only a few weeks earlier, and relayed this back to Deanna.

Deanna was jubilant. "See? She is snooping! So what do you reckon she's up to? Do you think she knows?"

"Well I doubt she'd tell you if she did." Luella countered. "But I think her mother must have said something to her. Maybe she wants her to keep an eye on us from a student's point of view. Makes sense, and I wouldn't put it past Mrs. Lovegood to use her own daughter as a spy."

Deanna grinned, delighted at being proved right. "Well, that settles it. We'll have to be careful what we say around her. Make sure she's not reporting our every move back to her mum, or worse, Snape."

Luella, however, had her doubts. "I don't know, I still think she's on our side. I mean, she swore to me on the Great Serpent that she'd do all in her power to help if she could. I think she's trustworthy."

Deanna sneered. "You believed her? Lu, there's plenty of Slytherins who swore oaths on the Great Serpent during the Reign of Terror, that they'd protect their friends and stand firm against Voldy. Then promptly broke them. Branwen Stormosi swore a pact with Mum, Auntie Mel and their other friend Lily Evans on the Great Serpent. Look what happened to her. Words, Lu, that's all the Slytherin Serpent is these days. Trust no one."

Luella sighed. Deanna did have a point, they didn't really know what Marlie's motives were after all. Bidding her goodnight, she slipped out from under the hangings and went to bed.

The fallout from that night's events proved to be less challenging than they expected. Rianne appeared not to bear them any ill-will for what had happened. The rest of the Slytherins had apparently been instructed by either Debra or Snape not to mention anything.

Luella was approached by Lucas Vetinari in the Slytherin common room the following day.

"Luella, is it true? All these rumours flying around, that Rianne's mum's a Death Eater. Please tell me the truth, I almost got in a fight with Winter after he reckoned Rianne was in every way her mother's daughter." He looked slightly desperate.

Luella hung her head. "It's true. Her mother's in Azkaban. Apparently she was spying for Voldemort. Listen, Lucas," she said, ignoring the boy's wince at her mention of Voldemort. "I'd be grateful if you could not mention it to her or anything, she's a bit upset about it all.

Lucas closed his eyes and held himself for a bit. Then he opened them and replied, "OK. Will do. But I wanted you to know, and I'd like it if you could pass this on to her, that I don't think any the worse of her. I still think she's cool, and I don't think she's a Death Eater type. I'll also stop the other lads from saying anything untoward if you like. They'll listen to me. Well, Lynchie and Bryant will anyway. So will Foxy if he knows what's good for him. Don't know about Montague though, but he'll shut up if the rest of us gang up on him."

Luella thanked him gratefully. The last thing Rianne needed was comments in lessons or in the Nest. If all five Slytherin boys were also looking out for her, it vastly lessened the risk of Rianne getting picked on. Rianne seemed comforted by the fact that her fellow first years were all supporting her anyway. In fact, when told that it was Lucas Vetinari that had asked after her and was the one responsible for getting the Slytherin boys onside, Rianne seemed positively cheerful.

"Lucas said that? He really doesn't mind about me?" Rianne seemed amazed, but pleased. "Wonderful! Everyone in the year looks up to him. Aw, that's really nice of him. Guess we Anglo-Italians must stick together." This seemed to work wonders for her mood, and life in the first year girls' dorm began to return to normal.

Even the Weasleys were apparently sorry. It appeared Professor McGonagall had had words with them. They approached the four girls at Sunday dinner, looking rather ashamed. They looked at each other for a bit, shuffled their feet, and coughed nervously before speaking. Fred was first to speak.

"Erm, Rianne, me and George have been thinking, like, and we'd just like to say that we're really sorry about what happened."

"Yeah," George chimed in. "we're really sorry we said that about your mum. We thought you knew, honest. We'd have kept quiet if we'd known you hadn't been told. We hope you're OK and all."

"I've felt better." Rianne said curtly. "Next time, bloody think before you speak."

Fred and George didn't answer, they just stared at the ground and shuffled awkwardly. Marlie spoke, with a distinct air of sarcasm.

"Something else you might like to know. Deanna, Lu and me got the relevant information out of the Restricted Section by lying to Snape. As a result, we've lost thirty house points in total and all three of us are in detention. So you can stop trying to get back those points I lost you, because we're square now. OK?"

Fred and George just mumbled. Fred's ears turned pink. Squirming guiltily, they repeated their apologies and shuffled off. Marlie watched them go coldly.

"They think that an apology will mend the harm they've done?" she said softly. "I won't forgive either of them in a hurry."

"Bear in mind McGonagall probably told them to apologise. Although they did seem genuinely ashamed of themselves." Luella commented.

"So they bloody should be." Deanna snarled. "Thanks to them, we now face the prospect of an evening in Snape's dungeon pickling gods know what and dissecting the most revolting things he can find for us. Cheers, Weasleys."

Rianne waved her hand dismissively. "Forget them. Wasn't their fault. At least they're sorry. Dad should have told me a long time ago." She had a strange, hard look on her face. "I owled him yesterday, sent Barney with the letter. I'm waiting to see what he has to say for himself." Barney was Rianne's pet barn owl.

The girls looked at each other, feeling as awkward as the Weasleys. None of them knew quite what to say to that. The wrath of Rianne was not a pleasant thing to behold, even when directed at somebody else. Luella recalled Snape's words, that Rianne would never be the same again, nor would she ever entirely forgive her father. She began to see what he meant. This was not the same laidback, cool, intellectually curious Rianne she'd known before. This was an entirely different girl, intense, fiercely emotional and very vulnerable. Luella also began to realise what Snape had meant when he'd told them Rianne would need protecting. Not just from those who'd try and take advantage, but in many ways, from herself too. Nothing had been said by any non-Slytherins, all of whom were reacting to Rianne as normal. Evidently Professor Snape was doing a good job of hushing the thing up as far as possible.

Alfredo Stormosi arrived at Hogwarts a few days later. He said the briefest of hellos to Deanna and Luella, greeted Marlie in a slightly more interested manner, before turning to his daughter. Rianne turned away and refused to answer him. The situation could have become very nasty indeed had Professor Snape not materialised out of nowhere with Debra and Kat following him. The Stormosi girls appeared to have patched things up between themselves, as all three of them had been observed gathered together on numerous occasions in a corner of the Nest talking quietly amongst themselves. Rianne later told them that she and Kat had accepted that a five year old Debra had been in no position to argue with her father on the subject, and had acted for the best. However, she had in no way forgiven her father, and the look of

cold anger on her face as she followed her sisters and father to Snape's office spoke volumes about her feelings. She refused to divulge any details about what happened, merely telling her dorm mates that there had been a full and frank exchange of feelings between them and a lot of messy emotional stuff. Luella also noticed that Snape seemed to have aged overnight, looking very weary, with dark circles under his eyes, and snapping at students for the least little thing (although Marlie claimed that this was normal Snape behaviour and nothing to worry about). He was particularly hard on the Weasleys, seemingly blaming them for causing all the trouble. For a change, they seemed to take it lying down, their consciences still troubling them it would seem.

The detentions passed fairly uneventfully. Snape hardly spoke to them, just giving them a crate-load of sheep's eyeballs and a lot of pickling jars, then retreating to his office to let them get on with it. The three girls did not talk much. After a couple of hours, Snape emerged, looking more gaunt and haggard than usual, and told them they could go. Deanna and Marlie went without saying a word. Luella paused, and asked Snape if he was OK.

Snape gazed distantly back at her. Luella felt a wave of real pity at the burnt out look in his eyes. When he spoke, his voice sounded as if it came from far, far away.

"I've felt better. These last few days have been..." He shook himself, and the old Snape re-emerged. He scowled at Luella. "Thank you for your sympathy, Miss Martin, but I do not believe that my feelings are any concern of yours. Certainly they will not improve with your asking." Crushed, Luella followed the others out. She had been hoping that she'd managed to re-establish some kind of trust with Snape. Obviously, it would take much more work than that.

The only positive thing to come out of this was that Deanna and Marlie were talking again. Admittedly not very often, or for very long, but things were improving. Once, Luella had caught them having the beginnings of a proper conversation, before they remembered they were supposed to be enemies and stopped again.

Then, however, came the one thing that could put all the emotional upheaval out of everyone's mind. It was time for the Quidditch season to start.

Chapter Nine: The Seeker Singled Out

The start of the Quidditch season brought an immediate change in the atmosphere at Hogwarts. An air of expectancy settled over everyone. Students suddenly seemed to become very aware of belonging to a house. Those who were actually on the team found themselves virtually deified.

In the Serpent's Nest, it became almost impossible to concentrate on getting any work done. Slytherin, as champions for the past five years running, had a lot to live up to. Moreover, those in the know believed that Slytherin could easily do it again. The other house teams were apparently not up to much. However, Flint was taking no chances, and was putting the entire team through their paces no less than three times a week.

It was now common knowledge among the Slytherins that the new Seeker was to be Marlene Lovegood. Most Slytherins were quite supportive, if rather surprised that a mere first year was considered to be good enough. However, some of the reserves were rather jealous, and insinuations were being made that she was only on the team because she was Mike Lovegood's sister. Not, however, too loudly; Mike was considered to be somewhat over-protective where his sister was concerned.

Lessons with the Gryffindors in particular became very interesting. Gryffindor were the arch rivals of Slytherin and the team was considered by Flint to be the one to beat. The Gryffindors knew this, and the feeling was very much mutual. There was much taunting on both sides, and a lot of punishments were dished out for attempted duelling.

Luella and friends were waiting in the Slytherin corridor outside Snape's classroom, along with the other Slytherins. The Gryffindors were also turning up. It promised to be an interesting Potions class; Snape might not be a Quidditch fan, but there were few more committed to seeing Slytherin win than him. Already there were stories of him docking large amounts of points from Gryffindors with little provocation, and awarding larger than was really justified amounts of points to Slytherins. More stories than usual, in any case.

This didn't seem to bother the Weasley twins, who appeared to have regained their usual ebullient spirits. Fred Weasley lost no time in approaching Marlie.

"Hey, Lovegood, aren't you going to congratulate us?"

"What for?" Marlie said in a tired voice. What with all the Quidditch training, and being forced to work late to catch up on all her homework, she simply wasn't in the mood for the Weasleys' pranks.

"Winning the Quidditch Cup, of course! It's our year this year. We can feel it." George grinned, arriving behind his brother.

Marlie laughed shortly. "Weasley, if you think it's your year, you evidently know very little about Quidditch. Your team blows. Can't see you getting the Cup off us this year."

Both boys raised an eyebrow. "At least we've got all seven players. Got a new Seeker yet?"

Marlie turned to her housemates, rolling her eyes. All eight of them snickered and grinned smugly.

"Oh yes." she said sweetly. "I'd say we've got a decent Seeker alright."

Their conversation was brought to an end by Snape's arrival and the class began. However, that incident was the least worrying one that Luella witnessed. There were a great deal more flare-ups in corridors, some involving hexes being thrown around. A fight between the Weasleys and Deanna ended with Rianne getting hit with a rather nasty boils curse, and Lucas Vetinari having the Jelly-Legs curse thrown at him when he leapt to defend her. George Weasley, however, ended up scratching himself all the way through Charms, while Fred had to put up with blue hair until lunchtime, so Slytherin house honour was generally considered to be satisfied. Deanna emerged unscathed from all of it. She was proving to be quite a competent dueller, and exceptionally good at Charms and Hexes of all kinds. Luella had no doubt she'd make an excellent Auror.

However, it wasn't the nature of the fights that bothered Luella, it was the participants. Slytherins appeared to be involved in the majority of them. And it always seemed to be Slytherins versus either Gryffindors, Ravenclaws or Hufflepuffs. Never Gryffindors against Hufflepuffs or Ravenclaws, or Hufflepuffs against Ravenclaws. Always the other three houses ganging up against Slytherin.

Rianne seemed unworried by it all. "It's always been that way. We're better than them, so we're hated. They know they've not got a chance against us."

"Yeah, we're the team to beat." Marlie chipped in. "We're the current champions, and the best! Course they hate us."

Luella wasn't convinced. Was this what Mrs. Tyler had meant by Slytherin being considered the evil house? Deanna seemed to think so.

"This is what you're up against, Lu. They'll support anyone to win who isn't Slytherin. Don't trust us at all." Deanna seemed rather fed up.

The first match of the season was Ravenclaw vs. Hufflepuff which Ravenclaw won handsomely. However, the real excitement came three weeks later at Halloween, as Gryffindor squared up to Slytherin. This was the real grudge match, the one that could decide the cup.

Marlene was getting incredibly fractious with everyone. The stress was evidently getting to her. She snapped at people in the common room for the littlest of reasons

and became obsessive about getting homework done. After Luella and Rianne found her in the common room slumped over her books for the third morning in a row, they started giving her a hand with her work to ease the pressure. Even Deanna was supportive, frequently taking Marlene out to the pitch from time to time and helping her practice with some home made Snitches. Relations between them were still fraught, but Deanna appeared to be able to put her house first for once.

Marlene landed her broom after one such impromptu training session, and handed the fake Snitch back to Deanna, who lifted the Levitation Charm she'd put on it. Deanna surveyed her critically.

"You're doing well, Lovegood. I don't know why you're so worried. You've caught it every single time so far."

"Yeah, eventually." Marlene sniffed, trembling. "I took ages on that last one! I won't have time to do it if I've got another Seeker to try against! And no offence Deanna, but this is not the same as catching a real Snitch. I mean, it's a Transfigured ping pong ball with a Levitation Charm on it, for gods' sake." She indicated the Snitch dismissively.

Deanna looked hurt. "It's not that bad. Anyway, it'll do. Besides, you've had practice games against the reserves! You've won them all so far. You'll be fine. I promise you, once you're out there on that broom, you'll wonder what you were ever worrying about."

Marlene refused to be consoled. "Playing the reserves isn't the same as playing the Gryffindor first team! They're really good! And the entire school will be watching!" she howled.

Deanna sighed. "OK. Be like that. But you've trained hard, haven't you? You've been practising, haven't you? You can fly like that crow of Snape's with a rocket up it."

Marlene giggled at that. "He'd kill us if we did that to it. Shall we kidnap it and do a comparison?"

Deanna grinned. "Nice idea, but I think we'd better lie low around Snape for a bit. Stay out of trouble. Now, we've got a good hour before dinner. Let's try you with a bit of competitive Seeking. I'm off to get a school broom, then we'll compete to get the Snitch. OK?"

Marlene nodded. She seemed less tense than before. And she was able to beat Deanna to the Snitch more often than not. But as she later said to Rianne, Deanna wasn't the Gryffindor Seeker...

Saturday brought with it a fine, clear day. Perfect Quidditch weather, as Flint kept commenting. He'd decided that the team should sit together at breakfast, have a bit of team bonding beforehand. Marlene sat next to her brother, picking at her food. She was far too nervous to actually eat anything. On her other side, Kat seemed distant, as if she was thinking of something else. Flint was telling her off for it.

"Stormer, I hope you're going to be a little more aware during the match than you are at the moment. That's the third time I've asked you to pass the bread rolls." Flint sounded on edge.

Kat started. "Sorry, Marcus. I've had... things on my mind."

Flint was a little less than understanding. "Well, you can have things on your mind all you like when you're not playing. But when you're on that broom, Chasing for Slytherin, I want your mind focused on that Quaffle, and getting it through them hoops. Alright?"

"Alright, alright." Kat snapped. "I'm focused." However, she gave him dark looks throughout the meal.

"Mike," Marlie asked, "how dangerous is Quidditch really?"

Mike turned away from telling Jordan a joke about a midget and three nuns. "Dangerous?" he grinned. "Oh yeah, it's terrible. Bludgers everywhere, fouls, falling off brooms, it's great. So many cool ways to get yourself killed. I'll tell ya, Marls, until you've almost been knocked off your broom by an opposing player or been hit by a Bludger, you haven't lived."

"Mike!" squealed Marlie. "Stop it, you're scaring me! I'll tell Mum!"

The threat of a Howler from Mrs. Lovegood did not appeal. Mike shut up, and tried to reassure his sister.

"Just kidding, our kid. It's not really that dangerous. Me and Flinty will keep the Bludgers away from you, and the other players will be too focused on the Quaffle to bother about you. Keep out of the fray if you can, and just keep an eye on the Snitch, and you'll be fine. No one's ever died playing Quidditch. Well, not at Hogwarts anyway. We'll beat Gryffindor, don't you worry. You just keep your mind on the Snitch." He patted her confidently on the shoulder. Marlene smiled weakly. All very well for him, Beaters didn't decide games.

Further down the table, Luella, Rianne and Deanna were eating their own breakfasts. Luella kept glancing in Marlie's direction.

"Do you reckon she's OK?" she asked nervously.

Deanna was dismissive. "She'll be fine. She's a genuinely good flier. We'll win. We have to. We are the mighty Verts-et-Argents!" She raised her voice into a triumphant yell. The other tables looked dismissive. Several other Slytherins laughed and raised their glasses. Lucas Vetinari began to lead a chant.

*"The mighty Verts-et-Argents are we,
The backs of our brooms is all you'll see.
No one else can ever compare,
Enemies of the Heir, beware!"*

Other Slytherins joined in and the last line was taken up by virtually all of them. Luella was left confused.

"What was that?" she asked, bemused.

"Slytherin war chant. Although the second line's been adapted for Quidditch purposes, it used to be 'the flash of our wands is all they'll see'." Rianne told her, flushed and exhilarated.

"What about that last line though? Enemies of the Heir, beware?" For some reason, it sounded familiar.

Rianne was ever keen to explain these things. "Refers to the Heir of Slytherin. The one who will restore Slytherin to greatness and rid the world of Slytherin's enemies. Well, it should be Heirs of Slytherin really. There'll be two of them. A Destroyer and a Redeemer. We reckon the Destroyer was You-Know-Who, but there's still a Redeemer left to chant about!" Her face shone with delight.

Luella smiled weakly. Deanna patted her hand gently. "Don't worry." she whispered, "Hopefully, you won't be asked to lead Slytherin to victory, trampling all it's enemies into the dust."

"As long as flying's not involved, I don't care." Luella muttered back. Deanna chuckled and buttered her croissant.

However, Luella was worried. It was a little disturbing to hear what the Slytherins expected of their Redeemer. She hadn't thought it'd be so militaristic. The "Enemies of the Heir" bit sounded like the sort of thing Voldemort would use. She didn't want to defeat him just to end up as feared as he'd been.

At length, breakfast ended and everyone filed out to the Quidditch pitch. As they took their seats in the stands, Luella gasped to see how high up they were. Suddenly, she felt very relieved that she wasn't playing, and completely understanding of why Marlie had been so worried.

She turned to talk to Deanna, and noticed that she, Rianne, Chris Bryant and Lucas Vetinari were struggling with a huge roll of canvas.

"Er... Dee, what are you doing?" Luella asked.

Deanna grinned. "Well, we saw how nervous Marlie was, so we thought we'd give her a bit of a confidence boost. We've been working on this in our spare time, all four of us." They finally managed to get the thing unrolled, with a bit of help from one of Deanna's Levitation Charms. It proved to be a huge green banner with two Slytherin Serpents, one running along the top, the other from the bottom. They were very well drawn, with a precision that made it look as if they were alive. A closer look revealed that they were actually moving.

"Good isn't it?" Deanna grinned. "Rianne and Lucas did the Serpents. Chris painted the lettering and the background on. The Animation Charms were my handiwork. Like it?"

"I don't see any lettering, Deanna." Luella pointed out.

"Oh, of course! Silly me." Deanna tapped the banner with her wand, and the words "Go, Marlie!" unfurled onto the banner. She tapped it again, and the letters changed to "Go, Slytherin!". Then "Verts-et-Argents!", "Come on you Greens!", "Nice Score!", "Rubbish!", "Foul!", "Great Capture!", "Victory!" and "Enemies of the Heir, Beware!"

"Isn't it wonderful?" Deanna sighed. "We amaze ourselves."

Luella was, despite herself, very impressed. "It's fantastic! I had no idea we had such talented artists in our House. Nice Charm work too. How did you get that good?"

"How indeed."

As one, they turned to see Snape standing over them. However, he did not look displeased with their efforts.

"Your handiwork amazes me. I hope your studies have not been neglected as a result." Snape said, not unkindly.

Lucas replied, with more than a hint of irony. "Oh, of course not, sir. We'd never neglect our homework, would we folks?" A chorus of nos followed.

Snape seemed pleased. "Well, I am very glad to see you are all getting behind your housemate. Who did the banner?"

Deanna gleefully explained who did what, being sure to emphasise her own role in enchanting it. She gave another demonstration of the various phrases it had in it. Snape appeared highly impressed, although he was trying not to show it.

"Ten points to Slytherin for all your hard work. Let us hope it inspires our team to great things." And with that, he took his seat in the front row with the Slytherin Prefects.

Luella raised an eyebrow at Deanna. "He's in a good mood, isn't he?"

Deanna shrugged. "Of course he is. We're going to win." She turned to face the pitch. "How I love the smell of victory in the morning..."

It was at that moment that Madam Hooch led the players onto the pitch, the Gryffindors in red robes with golden sashes, the Slytherins in their traditional Green and Silver. Luella couldn't help noticing how small Marlie looked next to the others. Next to her, Deanna was producing the "Go Marlie!" phrase on the banner, while Rianne was screaming "Come on, Marlie!" Marlene actually glanced up at them, saw

the banner and waved. Luella couldn't see the expression on her face, but she was glad she'd seen the banner.

The announcer, a Ravenclaw, was calling out the names of the teams, as they did in the professional matches.

"For Gryffindor, let me welcome Oliver Wood! Don Adams! Tony Pearson! Maggie Moran! Kelly Darin! Matt Dyson! Aaaaand... Lisa Jones!" The Gryffindors went wild. Some of them had drawn banners too, although none so fine as the Slytherin banner. Luella felt a distinct feeling of superiority at this. Then came the names the Slytherins had been waiting for.

"And for Slytherin, give a big hand to Jordan Foxworth! Marcus Flint! Mike Lovegood! Summer Montague! Kat Stormosi! Laetitia Vetinari! Aaaand... Marlie Lovegood!"

The Slytherins howled with delight. Luella heard Winter, Lucas, Geoff and Rianne all pointing out their star siblings with glee. All round her were cheers and cries of support. The banner now read "Come on you Greens!" Luella glanced at the other houses. They all appeared to be dumbstruck that the Slytherins were fielding a first year as their seeker. Certainly they weren't cheering much. But then, when Slytherin was concerned, they never did.

Behind her, Luella heard Winter Montague yelling "Enemies of the Heir, beware! Come on, Summer! Come on, Marlie!" The banner changed to read "Go Slytherin!" as the teams kicked off. Gryffindor grabbed the ball first and headed towards the Slytherin end. Until a Bludger almost unseated Darin, causing her to drop the Quaffle. Laetitia snatched it out of the air, mouthing "Thanks!" at Darin and Adams, one of the Beaters. Laetitia swerved past Moran, narrowly avoided a Bludger sent her way by Pearson and passed to Summer who caught it neatly, but nearly dropped it again as Flint zoomed past her to get rid of a Bludger she'd not noticed. Bewildered, Summer didn't react as Dyson snatched it from her grasp and made a dash for the other end. The Slytherins groaned. They'd almost had it then! Dyson to Moran as a Bludger shot his way, then Moran made a shot for goal... And promptly saw the Quaffle snatched up by Jordan who passed it back to Kat.

Meanwhile Marlie was circling above the fray, scanning the area frantically for any sign of the Snitch and desperately trying to remember some of the Quidditch moves Mike had told her about. No sign of the Snitch anywhere. Not far away, the Gryffindor Seeker, Jones, was also watching carefully.

A cheer went up from the green end. Laetitia had scored. Marlie clapped and returned to circling, when she was suddenly distracted by a blonde and green blur rushing towards her. Seconds later, a bat connected with the Bludger that was on a collision course with her head, sending it spiralling away towards a Gryffindor Chaser.

"Watch out for them, Marlie! That one nearly had you!" Mike called out, before returning to keep an eye out for Bludgers. Marlie nodded weakly. That Bludger could easily have killed her. She felt her knees turn to water, and gripped the broom tightly. Then she suddenly realised that Jones had vanished. Next thing, she registered the

Gryffindor heading for a small glimmer near the Slytherin end. Hastily, Marlie immediately pursued her. She couldn't let Gryffindor get to it so soon, not on her first game. "Come on!" she hissed, pushing her Cleansweep to the limit. Both spectators and players paused to watch the chase. Except for Mike, who had the presence of mind to hit a Bludger towards Jones. She swerved to avoid it, then turned again to go for the Snitch. But it had disappeared. Marlie halted her own broom and got out of the way. Taking advantage of the pause, Kat snatched the Quaffle out of Moran's arms and scored with it. Another cheer from the Slytherins. Twenty-nil to the Greens.

Marlie noticed the banner with "Go Marlie!" on it again. Deanna, Rianne and Luella were among those holding it up. Mustn't disappoint, she thought to herself. Then it changed to "Enemies of the Heir, Beware!" The "Enemies of the Heir" bit rolled on first then disappeared to make way for the word "Beware!" which flashed several times. The sequence then kept repeating. Marlie raised an eyebrow. Deanna was the only one competent enough at Charms to manage that, but surely she wouldn't have gone to all that trouble for her? Marlie was about to return her attention to the game, when she noticed a glimmer above the banner that was nothing to do with the Slytherin Serpents. She glanced at Jones, who appeared to have noticed nothing. The rest of the players were all down at the Gryffindor end, where Summer was taking a penalty.

Marlie spun her broom round and shot straight for the Slytherin stands. Before her, Slytherins suddenly noticed her approach, screamed and dived to the floor. Out of the corner of her eye, she noticed Snape snarling at her and Deanna screaming something. However, all her attention was focused on the hovering gleaming object in front of her. There was no doubting it, it was the Snitch. Praying she wouldn't crash into the stands, she lifted her broom at the last moment, and grabbed the Snitch as she flew past. Up she went, then levelled off. Gazing at the Snitch, still struggling in her hand, it suddenly dawned on her. She'd done it! It was hers! The game was less than twenty minutes old, and she'd got the Snitch! It was all over. Joyously, she screamed to the Slytherins below her "I GOT IT!! LOOK!!"

The Slytherins emerged from beneath their seats to see what the fuss was about. She held the Snitch up for them to see and circled above the first years, crying out "I got it, I got it! We won!" Comprehension began to dawn on the upturned Slytherin faces, as people suddenly began jumping up and down, hugging each other and screaming. Marlie, tears rolling down her cheeks, flew over Luella, Deanna and Rianne, who were all three clutching each other and shouting. Deanna was yelling "See? Told you you could do it!" Rianne and Luella just grabbed each other and smiled like mad.

The rest of the team had finally cottoned on to what had happened and were racing over to congratulate her. Mike grabbed his sister round the waist and kissed her on the cheek before proclaiming to anyone who would listen "That's my sister, that is!" The team hugged each other in a circle and sank gratefully to the floor of the arena. The green area was going crazy, the banner flashing alternately between "Great Capture!", "Victory!", "Enemies of the Heir" and "Go Marlie!". Even Snape looked pleased, although he wasn't clapping, just standing with his arms folded, smiling. The rest of the crowd looked rather less pleased. They'd wanted Gryffindor to win. The Gryffindor end was silent. Their team was also landing, their faces gloomy. Marlie was too ecstatic to care. 180 to nil was a pretty good score any day, but against the old

enemy, it was even sweeter. Potions on Monday had never looked like being more fun. Marlie glanced at the downcast Gryffindor crowd. The Weasley twins were in the middle, immediately recognisable by their red hair. Marlie, even at this distance, could see their looks of uncomprehending shock. She waved, blew a kiss, then dropped a mock curtsy before heading off to join the rest of the team.

The rest of the day proved a blur. A party soon got into full swing in the Serpent's Nest, with food swiped from the kitchens and more than a few practical jokes being played. The banner was now decorating the Slytherin common room, and was attracting plenty of admiring looks. No one could believe that first years had come up with it.

"It seems our newbies are determined to distinguish themselves!" Debra said warmly. "First Marlie Lovegood wins the match against our arch-rivals for us," here she paused to allow for more cheering and ruffling of Marlie's hair, "then Deanna Tyler, Rianne, Lucas Vetinari and Chris Bryant come up with this. I'm very proud of all you. You five, have a house point each for your talent."

Rianne started to say "But Professor Snape - " before Deanna kicked her sharply on the ankle, and profusely thanked Debra for her kindness.

Marlie was thoroughly over excited by it all, and was busy enthusing to Luella. "I can't believe it, I just can't! I caught the Snitch, on my first game ever! Oh my gods, I don't believe I did it!"

"Well... you did! Congratulations, mate!" Luella grinned back.

"Ohh... thank you!" Marlie cried, hugging her.

A soft voice said behind her, "You most certainly did, Miss Lovegood. However, do try not to crash into the stands next time, you'll get yourself thrown off the team."

Marlie turned. It was Snape. She went a bit pale with fright; Snape had that effect on her.

"You... you're not going to throw me off the team, are you? I mean," she stammered, "I didn't mean to nearly crash into the stands, honest! I wasn't showing off or anything, I just saw the Snitch there and... and..."

Snape silenced her with a wave of his hand. "I have no intention of taking you off the team. In fact, I wish to congratulate you on a very skilful bit of flying and a most daring capture. However, given that I have no wish to scrape you and whoever else you've managed to kill off the stands, I'd like to ask you not to repeat it. Or if you must frighten us all like that, could you at least aim for a different house?" Snape said, amused.

Marlie blushed and giggled. "I'll try, sir. 180 to nil though, weren't we good?"

Snape nodded. "Indeed you were. I am very proud of all of you. A toast to our glorious team!" They all drank to the team members who just grinned. Snape then commented on the banner.

"Ah yes, I see our first year supporters club has decided to exhibit their handiwork for all to see. Well worth the ten points I awarded earlier."

Debra was outraged. "You mean, you already gave them... Tyler! Stormosi! Vetinari! Bryant! Five points off Slytherin for not telling me that! Sneaky little... oooh!"

Snape said nothing, simply casting Deanna an amused look that left Deanna in no doubt as to who he thought responsible for keeping quiet. Instead, he just said to her, "I take it this is to be a permanent feature of the Nest now?"

"Well, we hadn't thought of that... but why not? It can be a house heirloom. Future generations of Slytherins can take it to their Quidditch games and use it to inspire their team on to victory. Long after they've all forgotten who Marlie is." Deanna was getting carried away.

"So never, then." said a proud Mike. Marlie went red and turned away. She came face to face with Dexter Crabbe, the reserve Seeker who'd been one of those muttering in corners about how Marlie owed her place on the team to nepotism. He looked like he was forcing himself to grin.

"Well, Lovegood, got to hand it to you, you played an amazing game. I'd like to say how sorry I am that I ever suspected you of using your family connections to get on the team." Again that same forced grin.

Marlie wasn't sure how to react. "Er... thank you." She wasn't sure what to say and the big fifth year was scaring her.

Crabbe had two glasses of pumpkin juice in his hands. "How about we drink a toast? To your future as a Seeker." He handed her a glass. Not knowing what to do and not wanting to appear rude, Marlie drank. Crabbe grinned again, patted her on the shoulder and left.

Luella had watched that exchange and went over to Marlie, concerned. There was something very suspicious about the reserve Seeker's behaviour.

"What was that about, Marlie?" she asked.

Marlie shook her head. "Don't know. Just wanted to congratulate me and drink a toast. He's freaking me out though. Just seemed really weird. Oh well." She shrugged it off. Before Luella could say anymore, Deanna interrupted with a tray of drinks.

"Move over, Rover, Tyler's comin' over!" she announced theatrically. "A toast to our wonderful Seeker!" She passed out glasses and drank hers in one. Luella also drank. Marlie however remained still. She had a look of deep suspicion on her face.

"Well, now, here's a turn up for the books. Deanna Tyler saying something nice about me. Only a few weeks ago I was a nepotistic, crawling, teacher's pet. Now I'm a star, I'm everyone's favourite Slytherin all of a sudden."

Deanna coughed, embarrassed. She shuffled her feet awkwardly. "Ah, yes, well. Er, I was meaning to talk to you about that. Listen, about that fight we had... Look, I'm sorry I accused of you of crawling your way onto the team. And I'm sorry I slapped you. It was uncalled for, and I'm sorry. You're a terrific Seeker, and that was an amazing bit of flying today, even if you did nearly kill us all."

Marlene looked surprised, and rather smug. An apology from Deanna was not a common occurrence. However, Marlie's expression then softened.

"Alright, I forgive you. I shouldn't have said that about your mum either, that was right out of line. And... I wanted to thank you for doing the extra training with me, and knocking out those fake Snitches. And telling me I could do it. I couldn't have done it without you."

Deanna and Marlie were looking at each other, if not with affection then certainly with respect. Deanna held out her hand.

"Peace?"

Marlie smiled and took it. "Peace." She drank her own pumpkin juice. Luella smiled. One less thing to worry about.

Marlie then made her way over to Rianne, Chris and Lucas, who were admiring the banner.

"I'd also like to thank you four for this amazing banner! It's wonderful! Plus I wouldn't have seen the Snitch without it."

Lucas and Rianne hugged her, while Chris shuffled shyly around. Luella wandered off and left them to it.

Monday afternoon found all the Slytherin first year in a state of high excitement. Last thing on Mondays was Potions with Snape... and the Gryffindors. Deanna had been preparing for this for some time. Not, however, by doing much in the way of homework. First she'd pushed Chris into adding the 180-nil scoreline to the banner. Next, a reduction charm had shrunk it to a more manageable size. Finally, Deanna had attached it to her bag so it could be easily demonstrated to any passing Gryffindors. So far it had attracted a few dark looks and mutterings, but very little actual action. Deanna's reputation as a star dueller had spread.

The other Slytherins, however, were very impressed. Alex Lynch in particular was giving it some very admiring looks. The Gryffindors said nothing. The Weasleys and their friend Lee Jordan glared at Deanna with barely concealed hatred. Deanna just grinned smugly.

Marlie turned up and promptly caused even more annoyance to the waiting Gryffindors. The Slytherins immediately began cheering her. Some were even prostrating themselves before her. Lucas and Deanna were both shouting "Make way for the Quidditch Queen! All Hail Queen Marlie!" Marlie blushed, embarrassed.

"Stop it, you lot. You're embarrassing me." she said roughly. Marlie had not been feeling well since the previous evening. She rubbed her head, squinting painfully. She was rather glad it was dark down here, it was easier on her eyes. If only it were warmer. She shivered, despite the sweat on her skin. This did not stop her from getting patted on the back, having her hair ruffled and generally being made a fuss of by her housemates.

Things were not improved by Winter and Geoff presenting the Weasleys with a small wooden coffin they'd made.

"We got you this, boys. Thought you might need it." Winter grinned evilly.

"Why's that." Fred said grumpily.

"It's for your chances of winning the Quidditch Cup this year. Seeing as they're now officially dead and all." Geoff said, provoking much laughter from the Slytherins.

Rianne inspected it. "It's not very big."

"Neither were their chances of winning the Cup." Deanna said. The Slytherins howled with laughter at this point. Fred angrily knocked the coffin out of Winter's hands and stepped on it.

They were distracted by Snape's approach. "What is all this merriment? I had no idea you all looked forward to your classes so much."

Lucas answered him. "We were offering the Gryffindors our condolences on Saturday's game, sir." Behind Snape's back, Deanna held up her bag with the 180-nil scoreline flashing across it, poking her tongue out at the fuming Gryffindors.

Snape allowed the faintest glimmer of a smile to flicker across his face. "I see. Very noble of you, Vetinari. Miss Tyler, what exactly are you doing?" He had noticed Deanna waving her bag around out of the corner of his eye.

Deanna immediately stopped cavorting. "It's the banner, sir. We've added a new phrase to it. I was just demonstrating to the Gryffindors how it worked, sir."

Snape idly glanced at it. "Interesting. But I believe Reduction Charms are second year magic?"

Deanna blushed. "Well, they are. I looked them up in the library specially and I've been practising them."

Snape raised an eyebrow. "Indeed? Such devotion to your magical studies should be rewarded. Five points to Slytherin. I hope you will show such efforts in all your

subjects." And with that, he led them into his classroom. The Gryffindors were left open-mouthed and outraged. They all knew that Professor McGonagall would never have given them house points for taunting their rivals. Sulking, they followed the jubilant Slytherins into the classroom. As they filed in, Snape noticed the remains of the wooden coffin lying on the corridor floor.

"Whose mess is that?" he snapped.

"Fred Weasley's, sir." Deanna promptly answered. Snape flicked an impatient glare at Fred.

"Clear it up, Weasley. And five points from Gryffindor for littering."

Fred looked furious, but did as he was told. The class settled down to work.

Sat at the back, next to Rianne, Marlie was beginning to feel distinctly unwell. She'd been feeling rough Sunday night, but had put it down to a late night and all the excitement of Saturday. Now, however, she was feeling much worse. She rubbed her head again and held herself. How on earth she was going to survive Potions like this, she didn't know. She just hoped that Snape would have them doing anti-fever potions.

"Are you alright, Marlie?" Rianne asked, concerned. Marlie looked very pale and shaky. There were dark circles under her eyes.

Marlie nodded weakly. "I'll be fine. Don't worry about me. Just due to all the excitement."

Rianne was not convinced. "Marlie, you look awful. Go and see Madam Pomfrey. I'm sure Snape will let you leave the lesson. After Saturday, you're probably his favourite Slytherin at the moment."

Snape heard them talking. "Misses Stormosi and Lovegood, if what you have to say is so important, maybe you would like to share it with the rest of the class."

Rianne spoke up fearlessly. "I was just telling Marlie she should go to the hospital wing. She doesn't look well, does she sir?"

Snape regarded Marlie carefully. He obviously shared Rianne's views, as he appeared rather concerned himself.

"Miss Lovegood, you do appear less than healthy. If you wish to go the hospital wing, you may be excused."

Marlie shook her head. "It's nothing, sir. I'm fine. Just tired out by all the excitement on Saturday." She forced what she hoped was a smile.

Snape did not look convinced, but decided not to force the issue. "Well, if you're sure... If you do feel ill, you have my permission to leave if you wish." He returned to writing on the board. Fred and George Weasley stared at her open-mouthed. Someone

actually had a legitimate reason and Snape's permission to leave Potions and didn't take it? Their minds boggled in amazement. Marlie must be ill.

As the lesson progressed, Rianne and Snape's fears over Marlie's health began to materialise. Marlie was very distant while brewing up her Luck Potion. The fumes from the cauldron were beginning to make her dizzy, and she found it increasingly difficult to slice up her newt tails. Hazily, she looked around. The candle lights were hurting her eyes and the room was starting to sway. She was vaguely aware of voices around her, and Rianne asking her something, but she seemed to be far away and talking very slowly. She was suddenly aware that all she really wanted to do was sleep. Mmm... sleep. Just close her eyes and drift slowly into sleep...

Rianne shrieked as Marlie suddenly slumped forward over the desk, then slid slowly to the floor. Leaping back, she looked down at her friend, horrified. Marlie was spreadeagled on the floor, limbs akimbo, her eyes fluttering as if she was struggling to keep them open. Her pupils seemed dilated and her breathing was shallow.

Snape was on the scene almost immediately. Kneeling down next to the fallen Slytherin, he began taking her pulse and checking her breathing. Looking up at an equally stunned Fred Weasley, he snarled "What have you done to her, Weasley?"

Fred was indignant. "I haven't done anything to her!"

Rianne composed herself. "It wasn't him, sir. She's been feeling rough since yesterday, really tired and sleepy, and running a temperature. I've been telling her to go see Madam Pomfrey, but she wouldn't."

Snape had returned his attention to Marlie. He looked concerned. "This is not a good sign, I have seen these symptoms before... You say she started feeling ill yesterday?"

Deanna and Luella had by this time made their way over.

"Since dinner." Rianne said, still in shock.

Luella knelt next to Marlie, and gently stroked her face. Marlie's skin was covered in sweat, yet horribly cold to the touch. Luella shivered.

"Will she be OK, sir?" she whispered. "I mean, she will be alright, won't she?"

Snape didn't answer. He merely conjured up a stretcher with a wave of his wand and levitated Marlie onto it.

"She needs to go the hospital wing immediately. I may be some time." He hesitated. "All of you, pack up your things. We will resume this next lesson. In the mean time take notes on Luck Potions, their effects and possible uses from your textbook." He turned to the three Slytherin girls as the rest of the class packed their things up. "You three had better come to the hospital wing as soon as you can. This is very serious." Turning back to Marlie, he produced a small vial from his robes and administered some drops to her. She didn't respond.

"An all-purpose antidote I always carry with me. It will help her, I think."

Deanna gasped. "You don't think she's been poisoned?"

"It's possible. Indeed, likely. But I need to check with Madam Pomfrey first. Come. She needs help."

Chapter Ten: Sleeping Death

The three of them waited in the hospital wing for what seemed like hours. Marlie had been carted off into a quiet corner immediately on arrival, and was now hidden behind screens. Snape and Madam Pomfrey had disappeared behind them and were talking in hushed tones. Luella caught snatches of words, none of which sounded very encouraging. Madam Pomfrey was heard to gasp "Sleeping Death? But how on earth did a student get hold of that?" Snape's reply was unintelligible, but the tone of his voice was very serious.

At length, the screens were pulled back. Snape came out, while Madam Pomfrey remained tending to Marlene. The girls immediately rushed towards him, desperate for news.

"Well? Will she be OK?" "What's wrong with her?" "Is it serious?"

Snape silenced them with a wave of his hand. "Patience. I will explain all. I need to return to my office to obtain more antidote, perhaps you would be so good as to come with me? I would prefer to talk somewhere a little more private." He indicated the students in there for various ailments, magical and otherwise, all of whom had been observing the comings and goings with great interest.

They followed him in silence. Snape's facial expression did not look encouraging. On reaching his office, they took their seats. At least this time they weren't in trouble. Luella thought of Marlie lying half-conscious on the floor, looking so pale and weak, and shivered. She'd gladly trade away Slytherin's entire points total and do five detentions to have Marlie healthy again.

Rianne spoke first. "Well, how is she? Will she be OK?" Her voice trembled and she looked worried sick.

Snape looked very grave, and there was more than a hint of sadness in his eyes. "At this stage, I cannot say. She is very ill indeed. I do not know how things will turn out. However, she is young, strong and healthy, she has a fighting chance." He fell silent, unable to speak for a few moments. Deanna, wide-eyed, articulated what they were all thinking.

"Sir, she will... she will be OK, won't she? I mean, she's not..." She gulped. "She's not going to die, is she?"

Luella tensed. Reaching out for Deanna's hand, she realised that Deanna was also poised, awaiting his response. Snape looked at them with that same sad, serious expression.

"Yes, Miss Tyler, I'm afraid she could. She is very seriously ill."

Deanna stared back in shock. "No... she can't. She can't!" she howled before bursting into tears. Luella put her arms round her. Rianne looked impassive, but Luella recognised the look in her eyes. It was the same look she'd had after the family confrontation with her father.

"What's wrong with her, Professor?" Rianne asked. Her voice sounded calm.

Deanna raised her eyes, tears streaming down her face. "She can't die, she can't!" she sobbed. "We've only just patched things up between us, she can't die now! She's only a kid, it's not her time yet, it can't be..." She wiped her eyes on her sleeve. "Oh gods, suppose I helped cause it? She's been under so much stress lately, with Quidditch and study and fighting with me, of course she's vulnerable to disease. Gods, it's all my fault!" Her voice broke on the last word and she began crying again. Luella just hugged her friend, who buried her head on her shoulder.

Snape looked sympathetic, but his voice sounded a little harsh. "Calm yourself, Miss Tyler. For your information, I very much doubt your friend's condition was caused by the stress she was under, although it may have weakened her immune system in the short-term. Miss Stormosi, you asked me what is wrong with her. Have any of you ever heard of the potion called Sleeping Death?"

Rianne immediately started. "Sleeping Death? Wasn't that a particularly virulent cross between a Sleeping Potion, a mushroom with hallucinogenic effects and a deadly poison invented by You-Know-Who?"

Snape nodded. "Your general knowledge is to be commended. Yes it was invented during the Reign of Terror as an extra-strong Sleeping Potion mixed with poison and various psychotropic medicines. Its main effect is to cause the victim to become wearier and wearier until they fall asleep. If they are lucky, they eventually wake up. If they are not..." He let them fill in the blanks.

Luella's eyes widened. "You mean they just go on sleeping?"

Snape shook his head. "If only it were that easy. They do sleep, but it's a troubled, feverish sleep, with vivid, delirious nightmares. It's agony, hearing someone affected by it, hearing them scream in their sleep, unable to wake up. Eventually they grow weaker and weaker until they die. It is a most deadly brew, with no known cure. All that can be done is to administer all-purpose antidotes and hope the person finds the strength to fight it and wake. Very popular with the Death Eaters, that." Bitterness drenched his every word.

Rianne spoke in a hushed voice. "And someone's slipped that to Marlie?"

Snape nodded. "I have seen it in action before, there is little doubt. My own mother was a victim. I know the signs well enough. She has been poisoned."

Luella spoke timidly. "But something like Sleeping Death, isn't it illegal?"

Snape laughed hollowly. "Of course. Brewing and possessing it without a licence are illegal, and licences are issued under very strict regulations. Administering it to a human being will earn you a life sentence in Azkaban. It is incredibly dangerous and very potent. It only takes a few drops to affect someone."

"So if it's so dangerous and illegal, what's it doing in Hogwarts?" Rianne asked sharply.

"And who'd want to poison Marlie, she's just a kid!" Luella said, horrified.

"Who indeed." Snape said shortly. "This is where you three come in."

All three went pale. Deanna stopped crying at once. She looked particularly concerned.

"Sir, you surely don't think... I mean, it wasn't one of us!" She looked panicky.

Snape allowed himself a wry smile. "No, I don't believe it was one of you. Sleeping Death is a particularly complicated potion, it is beyond any of your capabilities. Even you, Miss Stormosi, could not brew Sleeping Death."

Deanna seemed rather relieved at this. Luella asked "So who could brew it, then?"

"Well, I believe it is not beyond the capability of some of my older students. And the recipe is in the Restricted Section. Certainly some of my fifth, sixth and seventh years would be up to it." He leaned forward. "Listen carefully, all of you. Sleeping Death takes 24 hours to begin working, and approximately 48 hours for the sleep to begin. Miss Lovegood collapsed this afternoon, and you say she first began feeling ill Sunday evening, yes?"

They nodded. Snape looked thoughtful. "So she must have imbibed the potion Saturday afternoon or evening. Where was she then?"

"With us." Rianne said promptly. "It was after the match, she was at the party in the common room virtually all day, except for lunchtime, and the Halloween Feast."

Luella gasped. "But that means... she must have poisoned by a Slytherin, there was no one else near her all day!"

Deanna gave a short, hollow laugh, much like Snape's earlier. "Yeah, and? Trust me, if you're looking for someone to stab you in the back, look no further than Slytherin House. At least Gryffindors are honest when they hate you."

Snape was stroking his chin idly. "Sleeping Death can be prepared either as a powder which is sprinkled over the target's food, or as a liquid which is added to their drink."

So what did she eat and drink on Saturday, and more importantly, who gave it to her?"

Luella thought hard. "She ate at the Slytherin table at lunch and the Feast. But she had one of us on each side and opposite her, plus the Quidditch team were all around her. So not then."

"There was food at the party too." added Deanna. "But it was all on communal trays. They couldn't have poisoned that, it would have affected us all. And they wouldn't be able to poison food she was actually holding in her hand. Ditto the drinks, they were all in jugs, you had to pour your own."

"But did she, though?" Snape mused. "Easily, someone could have poured a drink for her while she wasn't looking and administered the potion before serving it to her. Who offered her a pre-poured drink?"

Rianne and Luella both turned to look at a now trembling Deanna. "I did, sir." she whispered. "I poured drinks for Lu, Marlie and me so we could drink a toast. But I didn't add poison to them!" she insisted. "I never took my eyes off them either!"

Snape raised an eyebrow. "No one is suggesting you poisoned her, Miss Tyler. However, your immediate suspicion that we might is interesting."

Deanna shook her head, frightened. "Well, I know we didn't get on, but... I didn't want her dead! Not after seeing her fly like that."

Rianne spoke up softly. "Deanna, you couldn't possibly have poisoned her. You poured the drinks but you didn't hand them out, did you? You just offered a tray and let everyone choose their own. In fact, you let Lu and Marlie choose first, didn't you?"

Deanna nodded. "Yes, but..."

"So," Rianne explained patiently, "if you had poisoned one, you'd have been sure to offer it to Marlie, wouldn't you? At the very least you'd have been sure to take a clean one. If someone had wanted to poison one of those, they'd have had to poison one and risk the wrong person getting sick, or poison all three and have all of you suffer. You two are OK, so those drinks were in all probability clean."

Deanna looked very relieved to be off the hook. Snape was also pleased.

"Miss Stormosi, your powers of reasoning impress even me. I hope you will put them to good use in finding out who poisoned your friend."

Luella was also thinking. Who else? Who else had offered Marlie a drink that day? And then it came to her.

"Dexter Crabbe." she said, suddenly. "He got her a drink. Wanted to drink her health. I saw him do it. He looked really weird at the time. Like he was up to something. Marlie didn't trust him either, although she still drank her drink."

"Little fool." Deanna snarled. "Mel Lovegood for a mother, and she drinks something offered by someone she doesn't trust? Didn't her mother teach her anything?"

"She was just trying to be polite." Luella said meekly.

"And look where it's got her! In the hospital wing fighting for her life!" Deanna held her head in her hands. "Marlie, Marlie, Marlie, why are you so frustratingly naive?"

Rianne was thinking. "Dexter Crabbe, Dexter Crabbe, I know that name, who is he?"

Deanna looked up. "Isn't it obvious?"

Rianne shook her head. "Remind me."

Snape, however, was beginning to understand.

"One of my fifth year students. And a good one, too. He's particularly skilled at Potions and Defence Against the Dark Arts. And Professor Quirrell was teaching his fifth years about Sleeping Death only a few weeks ago..." He looked thoughtful.

Deanna was looking grim. "That's not all he's good at, though, is it? He also fancies his chances on the pitch." She had a steely look in her eyes, and Luella was reminded suddenly of Mrs. Tyler.

"He's on our reserve team. He's Seeker." She drew a deep breath. "It's him, it must be. He had the opportunity, the ability and the motive. I've heard him talking, he's wanted to be on the first team for years. He was biding his time in the reserves, waiting for Aidan Lynch to leave. Then, just as he does, along comes this upstart little first year and takes it from him. He must have realised he'd never get on the team, not with her around, and that with only three years left for him at Hogwarts, time was short. So he decided to get rid of her permanently."

Luella was stunned. "Surely he didn't want it that much though? Not enough to have her killed?"

Rianne shrugged. "Who knows? Wouldn't put it past him. Debra reckons he's very ambitious, won't let anything stand in his way. And that's the beauty of Sleeping Death. It doesn't necessarily kill, but it would incapacitate her long enough for him to get on the team and prove himself. Clever."

Deanna was jubilant. "So we've got him! Are you going to expel him, sir? Are you?" She seemed quite excited by the fact.

Snape raised his hands, indicating he wanted calm. "While I am quite willing to believe you, you must understand that poisoning someone with Sleeping Death is quite a serious charge. I cannot simply expel him just like that. I need evidence. Convincing evidence. Otherwise I will have the Crabbes lodging an official complaint, and the Ministry of Magic and the governors of the school will be investigating. I could lose my job." He looked intently at them.

Rianne looked thoughtful. "But if evidence just happened to turn up..."

Snape smiled craftily. "Oh, if there was real, solid proof that Crabbe was responsible, I would of course act on it. However, he is unlikely to confess in my hearing." Again, that intense gaze.

Deanna looked him straight in the eyes. She was smiling too, the exact same expression on her face. "I understand you, sir. And who knows, evidence may turn up sooner than you think."

Snape's eyes gleamed with pride. "I hope so. I would dearly like to know who has poisoned our little Seeker star. If only to placate her mother when she invariably arrives at the school."

Rianne looked suspicious and a little shocked. "Sir, are you asking us to spy for you?"

Snape raised his eyebrows, wide-eyed. "I? Miss Stormosi, I am asking you nothing. Merely stating that I cannot punish whoever was responsible for this state of affairs unless I have evidence. If such turns up, then of course I will act. But it will prove very difficult for a teacher to acquire." He looked meaningfully at them.

Deanna got up. "We understand each other, then." She turned to the others. "Come on. Let's go, we need to talk."

Luella and Rianne looked at each other. Deanna was an obsessive personality at the best of times, but she appeared even more so now. Bidding Snape goodbye, they followed her out. They were greeted at the Nest by a crowd of fellow Slytherins all desperate for news of their Seeker. Deanna ignored them and sat down by the fire, deep in thought. Rianne was fielding the questions one by one. Mike Lovegood was first to make himself heard, and as he pushed through the horde, everyone fell silent. He had a wild, desperate look in his eyes.

"Lu, Rianne, is it true? About Marlie, I mean?" He hesitated, trying to find the words to continue. "They say she collapsed in Potions. Is she alright?" He looked terrified.

Rianne and Luella looked at each other. How to handle this? They were both remembering the events of a few weeks ago, Rianne snarling at Debra in rage, Kat sobbing helplessly. Neither cared for a repeat.

"What exactly have you heard?" Rianne asked gently.

"Just that she collapsed and was taken to the hospital wing. That's all anyone knows for sure. But there's all sorts of rumours flying around, that she's really ill, that she's been poisoned, that she's..." He gulped. "That she's dead."

Luella and Rianne looked at each other sadly. Well, at least they could quash some of the wilder rumours.

"She's not dead." Rianne said. "But she did collapse, and she is quite ill."

"Perhaps it's best you go and see Professor Snape about it. He knows more about it than we do. Probably best you hear it all from him." Luella added.

"He's in his office at the moment, why don't you go now? He can take you up to see her." Rianne coaxed. Mike nodded wordlessly and allowed himself to be shepherded out of the common room.

As soon as he'd gone, the common room erupted into noise. Slytherins were all crowded round, firing questions at them. Mostly concerning what was wrong with her and would she be fit enough to play Ravenclaw next term.

Rianne called for quiet and got it. Luella was quite impressed. Rianne might only be a first year, but she clearly had Debra's authority. She began to speak.

"Quiet! I'm just going to give you the main points that Professor Snape's told us. If you want more details go to him, although you'd be best leaving it till he's finished with Mike. Firstly, Marlie's not dead. But she is quite ill. No, we don't know what caused it, Snape refused to tell us. Probably overwork and stress, then she catches something and it completely knocks her out. Didn't help being in that cold dungeon of Snape's with all those potion fumes wafting around. We think she'll be fine, but she'll be in the hospital wing for a while yet. No, she may not be fit for the next Quidditch match. It all depends on how she does. Even when she's better, she'll need time to recuperate."

Groans and looks of disappointment appeared at this news. Those on the first team looked shocked. They knew that without Marlie, they were finished. Only Dexter Crabbe and his group of friends seemed pleased. Luella noticed them out of the corner of her eye. One look at Crabbe's twisted grin confirmed her worst suspicions. She glanced at Deanna. She was also looking at Crabbe grimly. She looked more fiercely determined than Luella had ever seen her. She glanced at Luella and indicated the passageway to the girls' dorms meaningfully. Luella nodded and gently touched Rianne's elbow. Rianne silently acknowledged her and brought the impromptu press conference to an end.

"Well, that's all I have to say on the matter. If you have any questions, you had better put them to Professor Snape. My friends and I are going to our dorm, we've had enough excitement for one evening. Come on." Ignoring the clamouring voices, Rianne turned and left, followed by Deanna and Luella. They entered their dorm and swiftly locked the door behind them. Snowy immediately leapt off Marlie's bed and ran towards them mewing pitifully. Rianne picked him up and fondled him absently as she sat on her own bed. Luella also lay down, looking at Deanna, who was sitting cross-legged on her bed looking very determined.

"So." Rianne said shortly. "Spit it out, Tyler. What's on your mind?"

Deanna didn't answer immediately. When she did, she sounded preoccupied.

"How are we going to unmask him?" she mused.

"Unmask him? I presume you mean Crabbe?" Rianne sounded quite disapproving.

"Who else?" Deanna said, as if the answer was obvious. "Come on, you saw him back then. He was loving it. Especially when you said she might not be fit for the next match. It's him, I know it."

Rianne still looked doubtful. "Well, I'm sure he might be, but you can't just go and decide it's him when there's only circumstantial evidence to prove it."

"Well, who else was it, then?" Deanna snarled. "He's got the skill and the motive! And he had the opportunity too. Luella, back me up here."

Luella agreed. "Rianne, the case looks proven to me. But we still need evidence though."

Deanna pounced on this. "I never said we didn't. And that's what I'm trying to think of now. How to get it." She fell silent.

"And what have you come up with so far?" Rianne asked.

"Nothing." Deanna admitted. She thought hard for a minute. Then said out loud, "What would Hercule Poirot do?"

"Who?" Rianne asked blankly.

"Fictional Muggle detective. Great at solving mysteries. Deanna's a fan." Luella told her. She thought briefly. "Comb the crime scene for evidence?"

Deanna dismissed this. "Too late. The poison was administered Saturday in the common room. The house elves will have cleaned it all up by now, including the goblet with the potion in it. So sadly there's no poisoned chalice with Crabbe's fingerprints on it to nail him." She sounded deeply frustrated.

Rianne also looked deep in thought. "So with no physical evidence, and no witnesses, I guess we need him to confess somehow."

"But how?" Deanna seemed interested by this plan. "Manipulating him into confessing isn't going to be too hard, but within earshot of a teacher? It can't be on our word alone, that's the whole point. He needs to incriminate himself. Damn, this is hard!" She punched her pillow in frustration.

"It's a shame Muggle technology doesn't work at Hogwarts, all we'd need to do is wire one of us up with a hidden microphone and trick him into confessing. Then get the tapes to Snape and bingo." Luella sighed. Why did things have to be so complicated?

"Nice idea," Rianne was saying, "but you remember what happened to Chris Bryant's Walkman. No tape recorder'll work anywhere near here because of the magic."

Deanna, however, started. "The Walkman! Of course!"

Luella and Rianne looked at each other then at Deanna. She had clearly gone nuts.

"Deanna, what are you talking about?" Rianne asked, bewildered and slightly concerned.

"Yes, what does Chris's Walkman have to do with anything?" Luella asked, puzzled.

"Not the Walkman." Deanna waved her hands. "What Marlie said to Chris afterwards. Don't you remember?"

Luella and Rianne both cast their minds back.

"She said she'd see if her dad could fix it?" Luella suggested.

"And then?" Deanna asked, her eyes gleaming.

Rianne thought. "She said she was going to work on a way of adapting it for use at Hogwarts. Wanted to make a project out of it."

"Bingo." Deanna beamed.

"Sorry for being thick here, but I don't see how that helps us. Marlie's the only one with either knowledge of or interest in the inner workings of Muggle gadgets, and she's in a coma in the hospital wing." Luella pointed out.

Deanna grinned. "She might be, but her notes aren't, are they?" She walked over to Marlie's bed and lifted the covers up. Under the bed was an array of physics textbooks and copious notes, all stuffed into binders.

"She's been working on it for weeks. That's why she was so overworked! Quidditch three times a week, homework and all this too! I first got suspicious when she started complaining about being overworked. I mean, she gets exactly the same amount we do, and she's not anything like as perfectionist as you two are about it. OK, so there's Quidditch, but realistically, that shouldn't have interfered to the extent it had done. So, while she was at training, and you two were watching her, I sneaked back here and poked around." She was grinning like mad now.

Rianne was horrified. "You went through her things? Deanna, that's a terrible thing to have done."

Deanna shrugged. "So sue me. I didn't look at her personal stuff, I just wanted to know what she was up to. And it didn't take me long to find it either, it wasn't well hidden. Just tucked away under here. Anyway, my point is, here we have some very detailed plans on how to adapt tape recorders for a magical environment. Are you with me yet?"

Luella was beginning to understand. "You think we should use the plans and build one! Great idea!"

"Just one tiny flaw." Rianne pointed out. "We are all technical idiots. Marlie knows more about Muggle science and technology at age eleven than most Muggles ever do in an entire lifetime. How on earth are we going to even understand the plans, never

mind follow them? We don't have the know-how, the equipment, the supplies, anything!"

Deanna just smiled even more. "I would have thought the answer to that was obvious."

"Not to me." Rianne said irritably.

Deanna sighed. "Think, you two. What do we Slytherins normally do when confronted by a task outside our ability?"

"Give up?" Rianne suggested.

"No. Think! More particularly, think Slytherin." Deanna sounded impatient.

"Get help?" Luella suggested.

"Close but no banana. Come on." She looked hopeful.

Luella thought. What does a Slytherin do in this situation? Finally, it came to her.

"We manipulate someone else into doing it for us?"

Deanna practically hit the roof with delight. "By George, she's got it!"

"But who do we know who's got the knowhow to do it?" Luella asked.

It was Rianne who answered. "Mr. Lovegood. Of course." She seemed unable to believe how obvious an idea it was when you thought of it. "He'd love a challenge like this, and he knows about our world. Plus he can get Mrs. Lovegood to acquire the magical things needed, and maybe do any magic necessary."

Deanna looked ecstatic with joy. "It's an amazing idea, isn't it? Damn, I'm good." She was looking very smug.

Luella, however, had doubts. "But won't he think it's a bit unethical, making a tape recorder to ensnare someone? Even if they did poison his daughter."

"Well, we won't tell him that, will we?" Deanna said patiently. "We tell him Marlie was working on it before, and we think it would be a tribute to her talent, and a nice surprise for her when she wakes up, if he could finish it for us."

"What if he thinks we're just interested in acquiring a sound system for the common room?" Rianne pointed out.

"He won't. Will he?" Deanna looked worried. This was the first major flaw in her plan. Luella was thinking. Something had occurred to her, a memory of a TV programme she'd seen recently.

"Wait. I think I have an idea." Deanna and Rianne looked at her curiously. Luella continued, still concentrating hard. "I saw this programme once, and there was this girl whose mother was in a car accident and ended up in a coma. Anyway, the girl compiled a tape of her mother's favourite songs and things, and played it to her to try and bring her round." She looked hopefully at the others. "We could say we want to do that for Marlie? You know, put together a tape of tunes she likes, talk to her, that sort of thing. Plus, if we say we're compiling our own tapes for her, that gives us an excuse to ask for a machine that actually has a microphone and records stuff. A Walkman won't cut it."

Deanna and Rianne were open-mouthed. "Luella, that's brilliant." Rianne said, in awe.

"That is the most devious, manipulative thing I've ever heard you say." Deanna said fervently. "It's wonderful! Let's do it!"

"I think I'd better actually write to him." Rianne said. "After all, he knows me. We'd also better give it a few days first, give Snape time to tell them about Marlie. I don't want them hearing it any other way." She seemed distant, a haunted look in her eyes. "Not for all the world would I do that to them." she said quietly.

Deanna and Luella squirmed slightly. They still felt a fair bit of residual guilt over their part in the Stormosi Incident. Deanna dealt with hers by ignoring it.

"OK. But when will we know when he's told them?" she asked.

Luella replied, "Probably when Mrs. Lovegood arrives at Hogwarts calling for Dumbledore's blood, and vengeance on whoever poisoned her daughter. And she will." She shuddered at the thought. "Poor Professor Snape, having to deal with that. She'll blame him, especially when she finds out she may have been poisoned when he was in the room."

"Never mind him, let's focus on Marlie. OK, so Mr. Lovegood builds the tape recorder, we do the necessary Charms - sorry, *I* do the necessary Charms. No offence, but I am better at it than you two." Deanna couldn't resist a smirk. There weren't many subjects where Deanna was better than Luella and Rianne and she wanted to make the most of the ones where she was.

Rianne nodded. "OK, we've got a working tape recorder. Then what?"

Deanna said quietly, "We need someone to worm a confession out of Crabbe while wearing it. Someone possessed of considerable charm and manipulateness. More importantly, it needs to be someone he'll trust, who he'll believe has no positive feelings for Marlie. Only one option there, folks. I'll have to do it."

"You?" Rianne asked, surprised.

"Yes, me. Look, I'm the only one who didn't get on with her that well. It'll have to be, won't it?"

"Dee, that could take months. All year, in fact." Luella said quietly. "Are you sure?"

Deanna nodded. "I know. But I'll do it. I mean, the bastard poisoned her! No one does that to a mate of mine and get away with it."

"But Deanna," Rianne said, "you know what the consequences will be? Especially with Marlie so ill."

Deanna nodded again. "Social ostracism, and the contempt of my entire house. I know. But I'll risk it. Don't look so worried, you two! I've had an entire lifetime of everyone hating me. I'm sure I can manage it for a few more months."

Luella got up and hugged her. "You'll have our full support. We won't abandon you, will we, Ri?"

Rianne joined her. "We're behind you every step of the way, Tyler."

"Thanks, I appreciate it. I'm going to need all the support I can get." Deanna shivered. "You know, I'm really not looking forward to this."

Luella gave her a hug of support. "Hey, we're here for you. Aren't we, Ri?"

"Of course we are. This whole thing is your baby. Without you, we'd be sat here helplessly looking on while that scumbag gets away with attempted murder. Now, we have a fighting chance."

"But it could still go horribly wrong." Luella reminded them both. "Suppose Mr. Lovegood can't develop the tape recorder?"

Rianne said softly, "Then we think of something else."

"It'll work." Deanna said quietly. "It has to." She shot another glance at Marlie's empty bed. "For Marlie's sake."

"For Marlie's sake." they said together, holding hands. They looked into each other's eyes. Their plan was born.

Chapter Eleven: The Dreaming

It did not take long for the news to reach Marlie's parents. On Wednesday morning, the end of Potions was interrupted by Mrs. Lovegood striding into the classroom. She said nothing, just looked at Snape and said "Well, Severus?" Snape went very pale all of a sudden and sent them away ten minutes earlier than normal. As they left, Deanna turned to Rianne and murmured "I think it's safe to send that owl now."

Herbology, their next lesson, passed all too slowly, and as soon as Professor Sprout let them go, they raced to the hospital wing to see Marlie. They slipped through the door and went to the far end, where Marlie still lay, surrounded by screens. As they approached, they heard voices. Deanna motioned for silence, and they crept up stealthily.

Behind the screens, Mrs. Lovegood was talking to Professor Snape. She looked furious.

"What I would still like to know, Severus, is how a student managed to lay hands on a banned substance like Sleeping Death!"

Snape seemed very nervous and unsure of himself. Luella did not entirely blame him; Mrs. Lovegood could unnerve someone even as self-possessed as Snape.

"Well, Melissa, Sleeping Death, not really my subject area, Professor Quirrell is the one responsible for teaching about that. The recipe is in the library, one gifted enough at Potions could do it, I've a few students who'd be up to it." He was umming and aahing a lot. Mrs. Lovegood cut him dead.

"A student brew it? The Department of Dark Arts Eradication's best mages could not unlock it's secrets. Don't you think it more likely she received it straight from the manufacturer?" Her eyes glimmered strangely and there was a cold, hard look on her face.

Snape seemed to freeze motionless. When he spoke, it was in a firm, soft voice they'd not heard him use before.

"Marlene Lovegood received this poison from a student, and no one else. Your best mages could never have worked out the recipe merely by observing the symptoms. However, anyone more than averagely skilled in Potions can make it up if they have the recipe in front of them. It is in the Restricted Section, but a resourceful student can find their way around that if they need to." Snape was calm but his every word was laced with carefully concealed anger.

"Be that as it may," Mrs. Lovegood said coldly, "this is Dark Arts activity of the highest order. She is in your house and your responsibility. If she dies," she looked at her daughter and they saw a flicker of anguish in her eyes, "I am holding you responsible." She regarded Snape contemptuously.

Snape's temper was beginning to fray. "My dear Melissa, I quite understand your feelings. However, I am at a loss to see what I can do. There is no antidote for Sleeping Death."

Mrs. Lovegood's next words were spat venomously at the Potions Master. "Then you had better find one, hadn't you? Come, Severus. They call you the Potions Master, don't they? And at school you were always far and away the best at that subject. Not even James Potter could outsmart you there. And no one understands the workings of Sleeping Death better than you." A sarcastic smile. "Prove your mastery. Find an antidote for Sleeping Death. Cure my daughter. If she lives, I am in your debt. If she dies..." She leant forward. "I know you, Severus Snape. I know your past. I know your mind. I know your secrets. And I say this to you, Dumbledore or no Dumbledore, you will find that some of those secrets might start coming to light." Her eyes bored into Snape's. She was evidently serious.

Snape met her gaze, but he still appeared worried. He seemed to take her seriously as well.

"Very well. I will do my best to find an antidote." He looked at Marlene and sighed heavily. "I do not wish to see Miss Lovegood suffer any more than you do. I will do what I can for her. She is in good hands."

Mrs. Lovegood seemed satisfied with this. Luella, realising she was about to leave, pulled the other two back. They retreated just out of earshot. As soon as Mrs. Lovegood stepped out, they began walking nervously forward. Mrs. Lovegood started, then recovered and greeted them warmly enough.

"Hello, you three. Have you come to see Marlie?"

Rianne nodded. "How is she, Mrs. Lovegood?"

Mrs. Lovegood shook her head. "No better, but Professor Snape has promised me he will do all in his power to bring her round. She is in good hands." She looked weary. Snape joined them.

"Here to visit Miss Lovegood?" he asked shortly. They nodded. "Go through then. Do not wait on my account." However, as Deanna passed, he stopped her and whispered in her ear. Luella caught what he was saying.

"Miss Tyler, have you thought any more about our conversation on Monday?"

Deanna nodded quietly. "We've got that under control, sir."

Snape's lips twisted into what could be described as a smile. "Very good. Truly, you have a Slytherin mind. Your mother will be proud." With that, he turned back to Mrs. Lovegood. "They will be serving lunch in the Great Hall, Melissa, would you care for a meal before leaving?"

"Thank you, Severus, but I must return to London. I have urgent business awaiting my attention." Mrs. Lovegood said politely as they left the room. The three girls waited until they had gone before gathering around their friend.

"Hey, Marlie." Rianne said, trying not to sound despairing. Marlie did not move. She just lay there, her eyes closed, looking paler and weaker than they had yet seen her. Luella was shocked to see how small and fragile Marlene actually looked.

Deanna stroked Marlie's arm tenderly. "Marlie, we're going to get you some cool tapes. Some of your favourite tunes, a few words from all of us, that sort of thing. Cheer you up, like." She was smiling helplessly.

"Yeah, we're going to give you lots of updates on life at Hogwarts. So you know what you're missing. Give you a reason to come back." Luella said brightly.

"And you know what else we're doing for you?" Rianne asked conspiratorially. "Well, Deanna found your plans on how to adapt a Walkman. So we're sending them off to your dad to see if he can actually build the thing. That way we can play the tapes for you here. And when you're well again, we're going to have the party to end all parties with it." Rianne's enthusiasm sounded slightly forced, but well-meant for all that.

Deanna lowered her voice. "That's not all we're going to do with it though. We're going to get the git who did this to you, Marls. We're going to trick him into confessing everything. And we're going to tape him doing it. And we're going to get him expelled." A fierce joy came into her eyes. "Whatever happens to you, we will get revenge for this!" She gazed fixedly at Marlene. Marlie just stirred in her sleep.

They didn't stay much longer. Marlie stirred slightly and moaned, but did very little else. After a while, they ran out of things to say to her. Luella found it very disconcerting seeing Marlie toss and turn feverishly, but not wake. They didn't talk about it over lunchtime, and the subject wasn't discussed until that afternoon's Defence Against the Dark Arts lesson.

The lesson was proceeding as usual. Professor Quirrell had them taking notes on superstitions and the best ways of avoiding bad luck. However, the class seemed distracted and it wasn't long before Lucas Vetinari had raised his hand to ask the question on everybody's mind.

Quirrell noticed him. "Y- Yes, Vetin- n- n- nari?" There was a quiver in his voice, almost as if he didn't want to know what Lucas wanted to ask. He was proved right immediately.

"Sir, what's the Sleeping Death Potion?" Lucas asked.

Quirrell smiled timidly. "Vetinari, that's f-f-fourth year kn-kn-knowledge. I h-hardly think you n-need to kn-know that just y-yet."

"Why not?" Lucas said forthrightly. "One of our year's in the hospital wing because of it, we need to know what it is. In case someone goes for us next." Lucas glared at Quirrell, as if daring him to refuse to tell him.

The rest of the class had taken an immediate interest. Quirrell's eyes darted terrified from face to face. On the one hand, he didn't want to incur Professor Snape's wrath by giving out too much information on the subject. On the other, he'd never had a class paying him so much attention before.

Alex Lynch came to his friend's aid. "Go on sir, tell us. We'd really like to know about it. Wouldn't we?" A general murmur of assent went around the class.

Quirrell seemed to realise that arguing was a lost cause. "Oh v-very well. But I'm l-leaving out the more dist-t-turbing bits." Muttering met this, but no one felt brave enough to complain.

"Sleeping Death is a potion invented by one of Y-You-Know-Who's followers back in the R-reign of Terror. It is believed to be a m-mixture of a very strong sleeping p-potion, assorted ps-psychoactive plants, halluc-cinogens, and poison. It's very dangerous and, n-needless to say, illegal. Use of it on a f-fellow student will bring e-e-expulsion." He gave them a warning glance. At least, the nearest Professor Quirrell ever got to it.

"It w-works by appealing to the soul's d-desire to escape the st-resses and st-rains of life and return to psychic oneness with all c-creation. The body grows w-wearier and w-wearier until the victim falls asleep. First s-symptoms will show in 24 hours of a-administration, sleep inv-v-variably follows after 48. Initial symptoms include f-fever, tiredness, l-loss of appetite, w-weakness, and ironically, i-insomnia. It can be m-mistaken for fl-fl-flu at first. However, the coma soon d-d-disproves that." Quirrell's stammer was getting worse than ever, as if he found even talking about Sleeping Death terrifying. Luella found herself wondering how Quirrell ever got a job teaching Defence Against the Dark Arts if he was that frightened of it.

"The c-coma that gives the p-potion it's n-name is the k-key to both succ-c-cumbing to it and d-d-defeating it. The sleep is a w-wild, d-disturbed one, during which the v-victim has many vi-vi-vivid and t-terrifying dreams. How they r-react to these d-dreams is said to be the k-key to whether they wake or not. For the d-dreams are said to c-consist of the person's d-deepest fears. They must confront their inner d-demons in sleep, and c-conquer them in order to w-wake, so it is said by many s-survivors. However, the potion gives str-strength to that p-part of the p-person that desires d-death, an end to striving, a return to the w-womb. This s-saps their strength and makes it more l-likely that they will give in. And if they d-do that, they will fail and d-d-die."

The class was hanging on his every word, shocked. Luella was stunned. This was what awaited Marlie? Going on her experience of the youngest Lovegood, Marlie had a tough fight ahead of her.

Timidly, she spoke up. "Isn't there anything that can be done?"

Quirrell's voice had little hope in it. "V-Very little. The fight belongs to the vi-victim. It is their d-demons that they must fight, and that b-b-battle is theirs alone. There are p-powerful antidotes around, and these bring some r-r-relief. They inhibit the effects of the p-poison to a certain extent and depr-pr-ive the person's d-dark side of a source of it's str-strength, enabling the p-person's desire for l-life to gain a respite and

f-fight back better. It is also said that p-p-playing cheerful m-music, talking to the p-person, reminding them of all the r-reasons why it is g-good for them to live, has a morale-boosting effect. But n-none of these are g-guaranteed. In the end, it all hinges on the v-victim's inner strength."

Luella shot Rianne a look. Rianne looked as concerned as she did. If Marlie's survival hinged on her inner strength and staying power, Marlie was doomed. But on the other hand, as Deanna said later, it did mean that their request for a working tape recorder was all the more legitimate.

Marlie looked about her, shivering. She'd never felt so cold in all her life. Where was she? It was so dark. Mist swirled about her, and an icy wind swept through her, chilling her to the bone. There was no one else around. Fear began to grip her. How to get out of here? How to get back to Hogwarts? A vision of dying here, cold and all alone haunted her. She began to weep softly.

"Help me. Someone. Anyone. Please." she whispered, tears rolling down her face.

"Don't leave me here, I don't want to die. Not like this." She wrapped her cloak around her and walked on. The wind died down, but there was still no light. She walked on still, until what strength she possessed gave out. Hopelessly, she sank to her knees and began to cry. Curling on her side in a foetal position, she began to prepare for the worst.

Then came the noise. A soft padding of feet coming towards her. She looked up. Approaching through the mist was a small shape. It was on all fours, so some kind of animal. Marlie attempted to make it out, but it was too dark. Not until it came right up to her did she recognise it.

"Snowy!" she gasped with delight. Reaching out, she scooped up the cat and hugged him tightly. "Snowy, thank the gods! Oh, I'm so glad to see you!" She stroked the cat's soft white fur happily. At least she was no longer alone. Somehow, Snowy had managed to find her. And if Snowy could find the way from Hogwarts to wherever this was, then there must be a way back too. Feeling hopeful again, Marlie got to her feet.

Snowy was mewing loudly. He seemed very insistent about something. "What is it, Snowy-puss? What've you got there?" She looked at the cat more closely. Clamped in between Snowy's jaws was a long, thin object, looking remarkably like...

"My wand!" she cried. Snatching it up, she waved it. A dazzling jet of sparks shot out of it. Clearly her magical powers were working just fine. "Lumos!" she whispered. The tip of her wand lit up. It wasn't much, but it was enough light to see by. Snowy rubbed up against her and purred. Marlie wrapped him around her shoulders like a scarf. Much better. The cold got to her far less with a soft, warm, purring cat draped round her. OK, so she was still all alone, it was cold and dark, she had no idea where she was, and no idea how to get home. But with a working wand and her favourite cat with her, things were looking up. In the hospital wing, Madam Pomfrey surveyed Marlie critically. There had been little change in her condition since she'd been brought in a few days ago. In fact, she'd actually deteriorated a little. It was really quite unnerving, watching her toss and turn, whimpering and crying. Although in the last few hours, it had seemed to get worse. Marlene had been literally begging for help, sounding quite desperate and forlorn. Madam Pomfrey had sat by her side,

stroked her hair and spoken to her soothingly but Marlene hadn't appeared to notice. She'd then seemed to weaken and stop fighting, just lying still, but her temperature had dropped, her breathing became shallower, her pulse slowed and she'd seemed to go downhill fast. Madam Pomfrey had reacted swiftly. Professor Snape had left virtually his entire supply of poison antidote up here for her use, with instructions that Miss Lovegood was to receive three drops three times a day and extra doses if her condition warranted it. Well, this looked like one of those extra times. A few minutes later, and Marlene had visibly relaxed. She was no longer crying, and seemed to be sleeping quite peacefully. Madam Pomfrey even heard her crooning the name of her pet cat softly to herself. Smiling with relief, she left Marlene to attend to her other patients. That evening, up in the Owlery, Rianne and Luella were attaching a large parcel to Barney and Spooky. Neither owl looked happy about carrying it all the way to the Lovegoods' home in Devon, but both knew better than to argue with Rianne. The two girls watched them go pensively.

"Do you think he'll agree?" Luella asked.

Rianne replied confidently. "Of course he will, he and Marlie are really close, and he loves a challenge. Thing is, will he be able to make a tape recorder that works here?"

Luella sighed. "Well, if not, we'll have to think of a Plan B. Don't know how though."

Rianne tried to sound confident. "Deanna'll think of something. Won't she?"

"Course she will. None better at coming up with hare-brained schemes."

And with that, the two Slytherins made their way back to the Nest. The Slytherin Common Room was unusually quiet these days. While it was frequently quieter than the other houses' common rooms, these days it felt like a morgue. Mike Lovegood, once so extrovert and lively, had turned into a shadow of his old self. He spent most of his time when not training or studying simply sitting in a corner staring emptily into space. Few dared to approach him when he was like this. Only Kat would sit next to him in solidarity.

Among the first year, the atmosphere was equally deathly, if not more so. Chris Bryant in particular seemed to have been hit hard by it all, not saying much to anybody. Lucas Vetinari was attempting to keep morale up, but it was clear that Marlie's illness had affected everybody. Professor Snape had told them all that Marlie had accidentally imbibed a deadly potion, but no one seriously believed that. Rumours had spread like wildfire, until finally Rianne had decided that enough was enough, and it was better that they all know the truth, especially as it was actually less shocking than some of the rumours.

Deanna was keeping apart from the rest of the first year. The three girls had decided that it was probably best if she gave the impression of alienating herself a little, to give her the necessary distance from Marlie's fan club. And so Deanna stopped participating in Slytherin social life, kept herself to herself and sat in a corner doing her homework.

Not far away, the Slytherin boys were quietly discussing Marlie.

"Do you reckon she'll be alright?" Chris was asking worriedly.

Lucas shrugged. "Difficult to say. Sleeping Death's not 100% fatal, it can be recovered from. But it's difficult to do that. Just hope Marlie's inner demons aren't too terrifying."

Deanna plucked up her courage. Now or never. "Pretty forlorn hope, then. Marlie's scared of her own shadow half the time. She's got the inner strength of a blanchmange."

The five boys turned to look at her. They looked rather annoyed.

"What would you know, Tyler?" Lucas snapped. "You hate the girl. Everyone knows that you and her weren't speaking until she won that Quidditch match."

Deanna shrugged. "So? I can recognise inner strength when I see it and Lovegood's got none. She's doomed."

"Well, we didn't ask you." Chris said angrily. "So butt out. We like Marlie, even if you don't."

"Suit yourself." Deanna said irritably and returned to her Defence Against the Dark Arts assignment. She smiled secretly to herself. This was easier than she'd hoped. She shot a glance at Dexter Crabbe and his friends. They'd heard everything, and Crabbe was now regarding her with interest. Deanna looked quickly away. Things were going very well indeed. Mr. Lovegood wrote back a few days later. Luella and Deanna peered over Rianne's shoulder as she read.

"He says he thinks it's a wonderful idea." Rianne told them delightedly. "Very proud of us for coming up with it, and very impressed at Marlie's designs, he says they're really good. Reckons it shouldn't take him long to build the thing, not once he's got all the parts together. He's just put an order in for them. He also says Mrs. Lovegood's fascinated too, says she's agreed to help out with the magic."

"Yes, yes," Deanna interrupted, impatiently, "but when does he reckon it'll be finished? Hopefully soon, I don't want to have to spend too long ingratiating myself with Crabbe's little gang."

Rianne scanned the letter. "He says it could be ready by Christmas."

Deanna nodded. "Not so long." She gazed into the distance. "The sacrifice will be worth it. At some point, you two, we'll have to stage a row. Over Marlie. In public. With the entire house listening in. I say we do that at the beginning of December. That'll give us time to start laying the foundations so it doesn't sound too fake. It'll also give me time to start gaining Crabbe's trust yet not have to spend more than a few weeks as Public Enemy Number One."

Rianne and Luella nodded. "Agreed." Rianne said.

Luella gave Deanna a hug. "Good luck, our kid. I know what this means to you, having to make yourself unpopular like this."

Deanna brushed her off affectionately. "Lu, don't worry. I'm hard. Anyway, I'm used to being picked on and being the odd one out. I'll cope. Come on, I'm hungry. Breakfast awaits." In his office, Professor Snape was going through his many Potions books, seeking inspiration on making an antidote. Corvus watched him curiously from his perch.

Snape angrily slammed another book shut.

"Nothing! Damn it, Corvus, there must be a way of reviving someone from Sleeping Death, there must be. Someone, surely, has done some work on this before." Snape gazed into the fire thoughtfully. Corvus fluttered over to him and cawed softly. Snape absently fed him.

"Think, Severus, think." he murmured quietly. "How does Sleeping Death work?" The answer to that particular question was not a difficult one. Since the Fall of Voldemort, Sleeping Death's secrets had come skulking into the light. His own thesis had been on Sleeping Death and it's workings. Flipping through it idly, he came to a section entitled "The Future: A Possible Antidote for Sleeping Death?"

Snape read, concentrating hard.

"Sleeping Death works by giving strength to that part of a person which desires death. Therefore, an effective antidote must not just inhibit a person's death drive, but give power to that part of the psyche which desires life. Conventional antidotes inhibit the poison, and give the psyche an opportunity to fight, but give it no added strength. I speculate that in order to be effective, the antidote must have energising, life-enhancing qualities, and be capable of dispelling the dark shadows of the soul."

He laid down the thesis, now intrigued. He actually remembered writing that. If he recalled correctly, it had been at three o'clock in the morning the night before the thesis was due in, and he'd been high on ginseng and caffeine. All rational thought had receded into oblivion and he'd been channelling whatever his mind had given him. Still, it had seemed to go down well with the Professors at the Invisible College, who'd given him top marks. And maybe, just maybe, somewhere in these youthful ramblings, was hidden a possible solution. Well, it was worth a try.

Snape began to search his stores for possible ingredients. Ginseng, guarana leaves, St. John's Wort, these were a given. Also coffee beans, cocoa beans, a fair bit of sugar and some strange golden concoction the Muggles referred to as Lucozade. Starting to feel much more enthusiastic about this project, Snape set to work.

Wandering through the mist, her wand lighting the way and Snowy draped round her shoulders, Marlie peered into the gloom. Ahead of her, the mist seemed to part, revealing a stone wall with a door in it. At last! A possible way out. Quickening her pace, she went over to it and pushed it open.

Stepping through, she gasped. Bright sunshine met her eyes as she stepped into a well-lit, comfortable room. Such a contrast to what she'd left behind. But that wasn't all. As the door closed about her and she looked around, she was amazed to see that it was her nursery from childhood. All around were scattered books and toys, some Muggle, some clearly not. All brought back happy memories. In fact, walking through

it all, Marlie felt the years fall away from her. Snowy leapt off her in fright as she metamorphosed into a little girl again.

She heard a voice calling her name. "Miss Marlie, Miss Marlie! Where is you, Miss Marlie!"

"Sukey! Sukey!" Marlie giggled, running in the direction of the speaker. There, clad in a tea-towel and an apron, was the Lovegoods' house-elf Sukey. She was sitting in a chair with a storybook on her knee. A young boy Marlie instantly recognised as her brother Mike was sat at her feet. Marlie ran over to join them.

"Here I am, Sukey!" she called happily. Sukey and Mike turned to look at her. Marlie stopped dead to see the looks on their faces. Both were looking at her with evident fear and confusion. Snowy mewed a warning. Marlie felt her bottom lip tremble.

"Sukey? Mikey?" she whispered. From her left came the sound of another little girl's footsteps running. Marlie turned and felt her jaw drop with shock.

There was another little girl there, also in the same blue dress Marlie was wearing, and with the same blonde hair flowing behind her. She was even carrying the same pink rabbit with her that Marlie had in her hands. Her features were the same, if paler. However, her eyes were completely different. Black, cold and dark, with red flames raging in the centre. And the expression she wore on her face was one of savage, joyful triumph.

"Here I am, Sukey!" she called, in a voice that was Marlie's, but transformed into something demonic. It sounded utterly incongruous coming from that little girl body. There was a harsh, mocking tone to it.

"Sukey, she's evil, watch out!" Marlie screamed. Sukey ignored her utterly, and then did the worst thing of all. She turned to the other girl and said to her "There you is, Miss Marlie! Where has you been, I has been looking for you all over! Come here, I is going to read you both a story." And with that, all three settled down as Sukey began to read. Marlie dropped her toy rabbit, put her hands to her ears and screamed. The demon girl turned towards her, cruel laughter in her eyes, and poked her tongue out at her, before turning back to hear the story.

Sobbing, Marlie sank to her knees, returning to her eleven year old self in an instant. What was happening? How could her own brother and the family house-elf who'd practically brought her up not recognise her? And how could they possibly accept that... that thing instead of her? She felt Snowy brush up against her, mewing pitifully. She picked the cat up and held him, feeling his soft fur brushing against her cheek.

"This must be Dark Arts stuff." Marlie murmured to the cat. "Someone's put some kind of charm on them so they don't recognise me, and then that impostor's turned up." She got to her feet, a feeling of resolution strengthening her. "And if it's Dark Arts stuff, then I have to find Mum. She'll be able to sort it all out." And with that, she set off. She did not have to look far. As she left the nursery and began searching the house, she was met downstairs by her mother striding towards her. Marlie ran towards her, arms outstretched, but was halted by the look of anger on her mother's face.

"Marlene Jessamyn Lovegood, what have you been up to now?" she thundered.

"Mum, you have to listen, there's Dark Arts going on, you have to stop it!" Marlie pleaded, but to no avail. Mrs. Lovegood, deaf to her pleas, grabbed her by the arm and hauled her into the living room. There, to her horror, she saw the demon again, laughing dementedly in a way oddly reminiscent of Peeves the Hogwarts poltergeist. And much like Peeves, she was busily engaged in smashing the entire living room to bits.

"No!" Marlie gasped. "Stop it, you mustn't do that!" The demon grinned at her and laughed all the more.

"Look at what you've done!" Mrs. Lovegood was shouting. "All these precious things, some of them were antique! You bad, disobedient girl!" She slapped Marlie hard.

Marlie sank to the floor weeping. "Mum, it wasn't me, I swear it wasn't me! There's Dark Arts going on, you have to believe me! Can't you see her, the devil child?"

Mrs. Lovegood turned on her furiously. "So you're not just a vandal, you're a liar too! Who was it then, your imaginary friend? Dark Arts, my foot. You are the cause of this, Marlene, and you must take responsibility. Come here!" Marlene cried as her mother dragged her off towards the cellar, ignoring her protestations. She found herself flung to the floor, with her mother standing over her, looking very stern indeed.

Mrs. Lovegood spoke in a chilling voice. "You must learn to take proper responsibility for yourself and your actions, Marlene. Stop pretending you're some kind of innocent angel. You may have your father wrapped around your little finger, but you do not fool me." She leant closer and looked Marlie straight in the eye. "You've more than your fair share of devil inside, Marlene. And until you've learnt to accept that and take responsibility for your actions, here you stay. Do you understand me?" She gave Marlie a long, hard look. For a moment, Marlie thought she saw more than severity in them, a look of pleading desperation too. Then Mrs. Lovegood let her go and walked away. The cellar door slammed behind her and from the other side, she heard it being locked.

Marlie was in shock. Trapped in here, by her own mother. For something she hadn't even done. Well, she had to devise a way of getting out of here. Feeling in her robes, she reached for her wand and approached the door. "*Alohomora!*" she cried. The charm hit the door just fine, but it didn't open. Crestfallen, she sat down in a corner. She wished Deanna was here. She was much better at Charms, she'd be able to get them out of here. Or at least think up a scheme to help them. Or maybe Luella. She was good at most of her subjects (except Flying), she might be able to do some magic to help them. Or maybe she'd have noticed something Marlie had overlooked. Lu was good at that, picking up what others missed. Or Rianne, perhaps. Adults always believed her, she'd be able to talk her mother round. Even the Weasley twins might be of some use; at least she wouldn't get bored.

It was then that a voice called to her through the small grille near the ceiling. Marlie turned. Peering through it were none other than the Weasleys themselves.

"Fred! George!" Marlie cried in delight. "Am I glad to see you! Mum's locked me in here, can you get me out?"

The twins just smirked. "Glad to see us?" Fred grinned. "That'll be a first, eh George?"

George was also grinning evilly. "Too right. Thought you hated us, Lovegood?"

Marlie began to panic. "Look, boys, I'm sorry I said all those horrible things to you over the years. I'm sorry I kept getting you in trouble with Mum, and your parents. And I'm really sorry I got you in trouble with Snape that time. I'll never do it again. But please help me out of here!"

Fred and George just grinned nastily. "Sorry, Marls." Fred said. "But you've got us in trouble for things we haven't done so often that we're rather enjoying the sight of you getting punished for once. Anyway, we've got someone new to play with now."

Another figure came up behind them. Marlie was unsurprised to see the devil Marlie again.

"Meet Morticia. She's just moved in at your place." George indicated the devil Marlie, who just grinned.

"Tell you what, she's a lot more fun than you, kid." Fred laughed, slipping his arm round her. "Aren't you, Tish?" Morticia just smirked. Fred grinned like an idiot, and they nuzzled each other's noses. Marlie felt her rage erupting.

"More fun?" she snapped. "She's an evil little tart, and if you can't see that, Fred Weasley, then you're a bigger fool than I took you for."

"Ooooooh!" both twins sneered.

"You want to watch out there, Fred, I think Lovegood's getting jealous." George commented wryly. Marlie blushed. He was right, but she'd rather die than admit it. Fred leered at her.

"I'd be a little more polite if I were you, you're really in no position to dictate to us, are you?"

"We'll be seeing you, Marlie. Maybe we'll be back when you're in a better mood." George said, and the three of them went off. Marlie watched them go, furious. First that devil kid turned her own family against her, now she was stealing her friends away. She didn't even like the Weasley twins that much, but hearing them prefer that tart to her was heartbreaking. Especially seeing Fred and her cozying up together...

She shuddered, and sank to her knees, the tears beginning to come again. Deanna came to mind once more. Far from mistrusting and hating her, she actually began to think positively of her. Compared to that Morticia, she was sweet and charming. At least Deanna would never pretend to be anything other than she was, no matter what. She couldn't see Deanna ever pretending to be all sweet and angelic to wrap parents

and teachers around her little finger. What's wrong with them all? she thought. Why can't they see through her, see her for what she is? She's evil and manipulative, pretending to be all innocent and nice so that people will like her and do whatever she wants, Marlie thought angrily. So why can't anyone other than me see that? Why are they all acting like I'm the evil one? She thought back to her mother, telling her she would stay here until she could take responsibility for her actions. But they're not my actions! she thought desperately. It's that devil Morticia. It's all her fault, not mine. She's the one causing all this! she thought furiously. Angrily, she waved her wand, causing a bucket to go flying across the room.

"Touchy, aren't we?" an all-too familiar voice came across the room. Deanna was standing there watching her, wand in hand, arms folded, leaning against the wall, dressed in her Hogwarts robes.

"Deanna!" Marlie cried with relief. "Tyler, you've got to help me, I'm trapped in here. You're good at Charms, get that door open! Please?" she whispered.

Deanna was dismissive. "Turning on the charm will get you nowhere. Anyway, this is your fight. I'm not allowed to intervene. I just thought I'd come and see how you were getting on. Not very well, it would seem." She looked around contemptuously.

Marlie felt herself getting angry. "Look, Deanna, if all you're going to do is make snide comments, then go away. I need help here!"

Deanna raised an eyebrow. "You mean you've not worked it out yet? Shame on you, Marlene!" She was grinning evilly. "It's not like you've not had plenty of clues, after all."

"Worked what out?" Marlene snapped.

Deanna sighed. "Where you are. What your task is. Who Morticia is!"

Marlie shook her head. "Who is she? I've never seen her before in my life!"

Deanna smiled enigmatically. "No? You sure about that, Marlie? Never had a childhood friend of that name?"

Marlie shook her head again. "Never. Unless..." Something occurred to her. There had been a Morticia in her childhood, hadn't there? And it wasn't the first time Morticia had got her punished either...

"She was my imaginary friend as a kid." she said softly. "I was always talking to her, playing with her, asking for a place to be laid for her at table."

"And?" Deanna pushed.

"And..." Marlie was thinking hard. She looked up. An idea had come to her. "This happened before! I broke some of my mum's stuff once. It was an accident, but I was scared of Mum punishing me, so I tried to blame it on Morticia. Mum locked me in

my room until dinner. She only relented when I confessed I'd done it. Wanted to stop me lying."

"Did it work?" Deanna asked. Marlie shook her head with a smile.

"No. Just taught me to blame it on someone Mum would actually believe it was next time."

Deanna's grin became even bigger. "And the moral of that story is...?"

Marlie shook her head. "I don't know! Tell me."

Deanna sighed. Disappointment etched itself all over her.

"Marlie, I can't tell you the answer, you have to work it out for yourself. But there are clues. Think! Your brother and Sukey think Morticia's the real Marlie Lovegood and you're an impostor. Your mother sees it's really you, but blames you for what Morticia's done, saying that you are responsible and must pay the price. And you're trapped in here until you are able to take full responsibility for what you've done. The Weasleys are glad to see you get in trouble for once, they're glad to see that someone's finally recognised that you've a devil in you. And then they prefer to be with Morticia. Why?"

Marlie couldn't think. At length she volunteered "Because she's duped them into thinking she's wonderful?"

Deanna threw up her hands in despair. "No! They like her precisely because she's not wonderful! She's someone as mischievous as they are, that's why they think she's great. Not stuck up little Marlie who's an innocent little angel who never gets in trouble! They're not fooled by her one bit! Think. Who's really deceiving who?"

Marlie snapped, "She is! She's tricking them all!"

Deanna sighed. She was evidently giving up. "Alright. Alright. What about me, then? When we first met, I hated you on sight. Why?"

Marlie shrugged. "I don't know. I never did anything to annoy you. You tell me!"

"OK." Deanna nodded. "You deserve that. I thought you were some powerless little thing who needed help to do anything. Then as I got to know you a little better, I saw that wasn't entirely true. You did have power, how could a Slytherin be otherwise? But you pretended to have none so people would spoil you and protect you. Your father, Mike, your mum, the house elf, even Snape was taken in. A sweet little innocent who never got in trouble and who would never do anything out of line. And I despised you for it."

"Despised me? Just because I behave myself and Snape likes me." Marlie sniffed.

"Behave yourself? Given a chance you'd be out-Weasleying the Weasley twins." laughed Deanna. "Which is precisely my point. You're not anything like as innocent

as you pretend to be. You're faking it, and the sad thing is, you don't even know you're faking it any more. And it was only when you started to show your real feelings that I started to respect you."

"Quidditch." Marlie breathed. "When I started to do well at Quidditch, you changed your mind. You helped me train, and you were proud of me after I won the match. You did the banner too."

Deanna smiled gently. Marlie was surprised to see how pretty Deanna looked when she was genuinely happy.

"Of course I did. You were terrified you weren't up to it. It was the first really genuine feeling you'd shown since I'd known you. I felt kind of sorry for you, to tell you the truth. Plus I wanted Slytherin to do well. So I thought I'd help you out. And lo and behold, you won, and you were properly grateful, and I realised you weren't so bad, when you let yourself go a bit. You and I could be good friends, you know. If you sort yourself out." The sneer had returned.

"So if you want to be my friend so much, why don't you stop talking in riddles and help me out?" Marlie snapped.

"I'm trying!" Deanna said tetchily. "Alright. One last hint. Our little fight wasn't all one-sided, was it? What did you hate about me?"

Marlie thought. "You never had anything nice to say about anyone. You didn't seem to care about anyone. No social graces whatsoever. And you were horrible to me! If I was bothering you, you could have said it nicely so I could stop. But no. You had to just bitch at me."

"And yet you called on me." Deanna mused. "When you were trapped here, in dire trouble, you thought of me. Why?"

Marlie shrugged. "Because you're better at Charms and can probably get that door open."

"And?"

"You've got a devious mind and could come up with a cool idea for getting us out of here. Although if I'd known you were going to be like this, I wouldn't have bothered."

Deanna chuckled. "Well, for better or worse, I was who you thought of. Why me, in particular?"

Marlie thought. "Well, I suppose because you're Morticia's opposite."

Deanna choked. "Opposite? How come? I thought Tish was rather similar to me in some ways, but there you go. Why?"

"Well, she's really deceptive and sly, really untrustworthy. Evil." Marlie shuddered.

"And I'm not?" Deanna raised an eyebrow.

Marlie shook her head. "No. You're not." She looked at Deanna all of a sudden, realising for the first time how much she actually respected her dorm mate. "You're mean, horrible and you've got a tongue sharper than a basilisk's, but you've never actually lied to anyone. I always know how I stand with you. You're far from perfect, but I trust you. I guess what I'm trying to say is... you're honest. You are who you are." She faltered, suddenly embarrassed. She glanced at Deanna and saw she was smiling again.

"Come here, you daft, soppy thing, you." Deanna said, not unkindly. She stepped forward, and Marlie found herself enveloped in a hug.

"You're doing well, our kid." Marlie heard Deanna telling her. They broke apart and Marlie looked into Deanna's eyes, now surprisingly warm and friendly.

"Really?" Marlie asked. "Then why am I still stuck here?"

Deanna smiled. "Well, you've still got a long way to go. But by recognising what you need, and respecting the ones who have it, you've made a good start. One which deserves a little reward." She turned to the door and pointed her wand at it. "*Alohomora!*" she cried. A jet of sparks shot out of her wand and hit the door, which promptly unlocked itself and swung open.

"Thanks!" Marlie gasped. Scooping up Snowy and her wand, she ran for the exit. Deanna watched her, saying nothing. Marlie reached the door and turned.

"Well? Aren't you coming?"

Deanna shook her head. "I've got other things to do. This is your fight, I can't hold your hand every step of the way. But I'll return, when you need me."

Marlie was not at all happy about this arrangement, but acquiesced. "Well, OK then. Thanks for your help!"

"It was nothing." Deanna said modestly. "You keep thinking about what I told you. Keep an open mind, and if you get in trouble, just do what I'd do! And Good Luck! You'll need it, mate." And with that, she disappeared. Marlie gaped in shock. How on earth had Deanna managed to do that? Apparition was beyond anything Deanna was capable of. However, she had other things to think about. If she was to persuade her mother that there was Dark Arts going on here, she'd need help. And the only person who could talk her mother round was...

"Dad." she whispered. "He'll persuade her." And with that, she ran off towards his workshop. It did not take her long to find her father's workshop. A surprisingly short time, in fact; she never usually got there that quickly. Hoping beyond hope that Morticia was still off with the Weasleys, she pushed the door open and went in.

Mr. Lovegood's workshop was a veritable Aladdin's cave of junk, a techie's treasure trove, the Nirvana of nerds. Bits and pieces everywhere, tools scattered around, plans

pinned to the walls, you could never be sure what Mr. Lovegood was working on, but it was always interesting to find out. Mrs. Lovegood avoided the place if at all possible. While tolerant of her husband's little eccentricities, she regarded them with the amused air of a mother watching her child at play. Mike appeared to share his mother's views, while Sukey was quite frankly terrified of the place. Only Marlie had ever really shown an interest, and she had proved quite an avid pupil. Which is why it was such a shock for her to suddenly hear her father speaking to someone.

"Now this, my dear, is something I'm particularly proud of. I've heard you and your brother complaining so often about not being able to listen to your music at school, that I've decided to do something about it. This is something I like to call a Walkmage. A tape player adapted for a magical environment so you and your brother can play music at school! You two will be the pride of your house, what's it called again?"

If Marlie had been surprised before, it was nothing to how she felt when she heard the reply.

"Slytherin, Daddy." she heard Morticia giggle. Marlie stepped forward meaningfully. Morticia was sitting in Marlie's usual place, with a look of adoration on her face as she listened to her father. Both of them heard her come in and turned to look at her. Morticia was wearing her usual grin of triumph. Mr. Lovegood just seemed confused.

"Can I help you, miss?" he asked.

"Dad, it's me, Marlie." Marlie said, panicky. "I need your help, there's Dark Arts stuff going on, you've got to talk to Mum."

Mr. Lovegood looked even more confused now. "You can't be Marlie, she's right here." He indicated Morticia, who looked even more smug.

"Ignore her, Daddy, she's not important." Morticia hissed softly. "She's not the real Marlie, she doesn't know how to be. Not anymore." She gave Marlie her most contemptuous look yet. Mr. Lovegood did as Morticia bade him, and began explaining the inner workings of the Walkmage to her. Marlene, unable to bear it anymore, turned tail and ran, sobbing as if her heart was about to break.

Chapter Twelve: A Witch Alone

Weeks passed. Still, Marlene showed no signs of waking. Luella and Rianne went to visit every week without fail, to give Marlie encouragement, but with no apparent effect. Deanna felt pangs of frustration every time the two of them returned from the hospital wing with the same unhappy looks on their face.

"Is she any better?" Deanna asked, hoping for but not expecting good news.

Luella shook her head. "No change. Just keeps tossing and turning, moaning. She sounds like she's having a hell of a time in there."

"Who would have thought our favourite little ray of sunshine would have such a traumatic inner life?" Rianne deadpanned. "What's happened to her in the past? Nothing!" A trace of bitterness laced those words. Both Deanna and Luella guessed what Rianne was thinking, but decided not to probe any further.

"She keeps mentioning you quite a bit, though." Luella said, changing the subject. "Doesn't she, Ri?"

Rianne seemed to come out of whatever trance she had been in. "Hmm? Oh, yes. Yes, she says your name quite a bit. I don't know what sort of effect you've had on the poor kid, but evidently you've had a pretty big impact."

Deanna raised an eyebrow. "Yeah? What's she been saying about me? I'm not torturing her, am I?"

Rianne shook her head. "No, no. She seems quite hacked off at you about something, though. Keeps shouting at you, demanding you tell her something. Don't know what, but I wish you'd put her out of her misery and tell her, because it's getting dull."

Deanna just chuckled. "Wish I could! But I'm not hiding anything from her. And I couldn't tell her anyway, she's asleep."

Luella seemed thoughtful. "I don't think it's something you actually know, necessarily. This is the Deanna in Marlie's head we're talking about, not the real Deanna. I think it might be that her psyche's trying to tell her something, and just keeps throwing out clues for her to work it out. And because Marlie has experienced Deanna as the sort to taunt and tease with bits of information like that, that's how it's delivering it to her."

"Either that, or her dark side has just thought of a new way to torment her, and is using the Deanna Within to do it." Rianne said irritably. "It doesn't help us though, does it?"

"No, you're right." Deanna said briskly. "We need to stop analysing and get on with things. I don't know if you two are aware of this, but it's nearly December. Which

means it's time for us to up the stakes." She looked meaningfully at them. "It's time for me to come out as a Marlie-phobe."

Luella felt a pang of sadness at this. So far, things had all been very subtle and under the surface. Now they were about to explode big time. How was she going to handle fighting with her very best friend? Even knowing that they were pretending didn't help. In fact, a genuine fight might have been preferable; at least she wouldn't have to lie.

"So how do we go about it?" Rianne asked calmly. She at least didn't seem affected. But then, expecting Rianne to show it if she had been was foolish at best. Rianne had been the very essence of self-containment ever since confronting Debra.

Deanna was speaking again. "Well, it's been going well so far. I've been making the odd snide comment from time to time, and I think I've made the other Slytherins suspect something. I think people are beginning to realise that I've hardly even seen Marlie either. And I must congratulate you both on the superb job you're doing of pairing up together and subtly excluding me. Anyone would think we'd had a falling out." Luella winced at the sarcasm, but it was true. She was getting along genuinely well with Rianne, and she couldn't blame Deanna for feeling a bit left out. After all, she and Rianne were the more academically inclined of the four, and Deanna was left cold by constant discussions of homework. Marlie's absence was beginning to make itself felt - she had never been one for her studies either and her idleness had kept them from spending all their time working. Now, however, Luella and Rianne appeared to spend their time studying together, leaving Deanna on her own. However, there was one advantage. It would make it that much easier for Deanna to break away and infiltrate Crabbe's inner circle. But Luella did not want a pretend fight for Marlie's sake turning into a real one.

"So the foundations are there." Rianne commented. "We just need to get the building underway. So when do we go public, then?"

"How soon do you think the tape recorder will be ready?" Deanna asked quietly.

"Soon." Rianne answered. "It's going very smoothly, Mr. Lovegood thinks it'll be ready by Christmas for certain, especially now he's got all the bits in."

"Excellent. So we have about a month for me to gain Crabbe's trust. Hopefully, I'll be in there enough to get a confession out of him by the time the tape recorder gets here." Deanna seemed thoughtful. "It only remains for us to have the mother of all bust ups as publicly as possible. So how shall we do that? Luella, any thoughts?"

Luella started at the mention of her name. "Er... no, not really. We should do it soon though."

Rianne appeared to have been thinking about this. "Well, we need to do it while the common room's pretty full for maximum impact. Which it will be now winter's drawing in. Especially later in the evening. So, my plan is this. Lu and me go off to see Marlie again. We spend a couple of hours there and come back. Deanna asks what we've been up to, we say we've been visiting Marlie and make it pretty bloody clear

that we're not happy she never goes. Argument escalates from there and we end up having a fight. See if we can draw in the rest of the house too. Could be fun."

Deanna grinned. "Could be! Assuming Mike Lovegood doesn't kick my head in."

Rianne was dismissive. "He won't. He's a gentleman. He might smash a chair or two up though. Or hex you."

"Yeah, right. I may be only a first year, but I'm still the fastest draw in the school." Deanna didn't seem worried. Luella wished she shared her confidence. But she couldn't help but have grave misgivings about this plan.

They decided to do it a few days later. It was pouring with rain and bitterly cold outside. All the Slytherins were huddled in the common room, trying to keep warm. The Serpent's Nest was underground, so it never got really cold there, however it was never really warm either. The fire was blazing, but it didn't dispel the dampness in the air.

Luella had gone with Rianne to see Marlie, as agreed. Leaving Deanna sitting quietly in the Nest with her Charms homework. However, it was fair to say she wasn't really concentrating that hard. Her mind kept wandering upstairs to the hospital wing, and forward in time to what would happen when the others got back. Deanna was by no means a coward, but that didn't mean she was looking forward to it. She might be devious and manipulative, but that didn't mean she lacked ethics. Far from it. Playing with the emotions of someone she didn't care for was nothing, but fighting with a friend was something else. Could she live with herself after this?

A little voice inside her head began arguing with her. *Luella's living with herself, though, isn't she?* Cut that out, she thought. Luella's my friend, she doesn't like doing this anymore than me. *Oh no?* the voice said. *She's not exactly averse to having Rianne as her best friend, is she? Rather enjoying herself, you know. She only hung around with you at school because you were both outsiders. Now she's not the odd one out, she's taken the first opportunity to find a new friend and forget about you.*

That's not true! Deanna told herself fiercely. Luella wouldn't do that, she wouldn't. She wouldn't turn her back on a friend. She's just hanging around with Rianne because I've got to get friendly with Crabbe. But doubt was creeping in. *Is that so?* the voice was saying. *Touching, but oh so naive. Not everyone's as loyal as you are, Deanna.* She bit her lip. Had she misread Luella? Was she as trustworthy as she thought? But she's the Slytherin Redeemer, Deanna thought desperately. I saw the Serpent with my own eyes!

Not necessarily. After all, it was only a rumour that Voldemort was the first child. What if Voldemort hadn't made the Serpent rise, and Luella was the first to do so? That would mean...

Deanna brushed the thought aside. Luella couldn't be a Dark witch, it just wasn't in her nature. However, she was still enjoying herself just a little too much with Miss Stormosi...

Such were her thoughts when Luella and Rianne returned. Both looked drained. Luella looked terrified. Deanna merely glanced at her coldly, resentment removing any trace of warmth.

Lucas Vetinari was playing Exploding Snap by the fire with Alex Lynch and Chris Bryant. All three boys turned to look at Rianne as she approached them, Luella not far behind.

"Well?" Lucas asked gently. "How is she?" Next to him, Chris looked hopefully at Rianne desperate for any good news. Rianne shook her head sadly.

"No change." Rianne sank into a chair, weary beyond words. "Just keeps whimpering and crying for her parents. Poor girl." They fell silent. Chris looked like he was trying not to cry.

Deanna gathered her strength. It was now or never. With the thought of Luella preferring Rianne to her to stiffen her resolve, she plunged right into it. Rianne's earlier words came back to her.

"Who would have thought everyone's favourite little ray of sunshine would have such traumas in her past?" she said sarcastically. The others turned to look at her. Rianne had a knowing look in her eyes. Luella looked scared out of her wits. The boys were regarding her with looks of fury.

"And just what is that supposed to mean?" Lucas said quietly, his eyes glittering with barely concealed rage.

"Meaning," Deanna said, sounding more calm than she felt, "that what has Lovegood got in the way of inner demons? She's been spoilt, pampered and indulged every moment of her life since she was born. What has she got to cry about? I don't know why you all feel so sorry for her."

Rianne spoke up. Her eyes twinkled in the firelight. "What would you know, Tyler? You never liked her before, and you've only visited her once since. You've not had to endure her screaming for help. Or mercy." She looked thoughtful. And the look in her eyes spoke, not of anger, but of amusement. She was enjoying this?!

Deanna gave in to the growing feelings of hate and resentment. If they wanted a fight, so be it.

Lucas was speaking again. "What is it with you, anyway, Tyler? Is there anyone you actually like? What has Marlie done to upset you?"

"She's a spoilt brat who thinks the world revolves around her. From day one, she's been Daddy's little princess, everyone's golden girl. She thinks she's so perfect, and it makes me sick! That's what she's done to upset me!" Deanna was livid.

"She's not spoilt!" Chris cried out. He was visibly trembling, but looked determined to speak out and brave Deanna's wrath. He gulped and continued. "She's a lovely girl, really charming and sweet. She's not selfish. You're the one who's selfish!"

Deanna, for once, was lost for words. Lucas, suddenly appearing to comprehend matters, spoke up in wonder.

"Why, Tyler," he drawled, "I do believe you're jealous!"

Deanna started. "Jealous? Why would I be jealous of *her*?" She spat the last word out as if it was poison. Lucas was grinning from ear to ear.

"Why wouldn't you be, you mean? She's popular, pretty and has a father who cares about her. All things conspicuously lacking in your life." He sneered contemptuously at her. Deanna felt herself go scarlet with rage and humiliation. He was right, she'd have given anything for the looks and popularity Marlie had. And there was nothing she wouldn't have done to have a father-daughter relationship like Marlie's with Mr. Lovegood. But she'd rather have died than let anyone else see that. The other boys were beginning to grin. Rianne's expression was neutral, but she had raised her eyebrows. The look on Luella's face was what really did it for Deanna, though. Sorrow mixed with an unmistakable air of pity. Deanna turned roughly away from her to face Lucas again.

"She's an stupid, arrogant, worthless little bitch who's been practically begging for something like this to happen since day one!" Deanna hissed at him. "It was only a matter of time before someone saw through her little charade, and decided to send her on the ultimate in self-improvement courses!" She felt her voice rising, and noticed the entire common room regarding her with shock, but she didn't care. Staring wildly around, she let her anger carry her where it would.

"And you know something else?" she snarled. "I'm glad! Glad someone finally saw her for what she was! Glad someone had the intelligence to see through her! Glad someone finally put her in her place." She paused and looked around the room. Her eyes met those of Dexter Crabbe, who was looking at her with surprised admiration. Satisfaction rose in her. It was working. Got him! she thought. She returned her attention to her fellow first years. They were all looking at her with shock, even Luella and Rianne. In fact, especially Luella and Rianne. Although Deanna couldn't help thinking that Rianne looked rather impressed.

The massed Slytherins, for once, were lost for words. Slowly, from the far side of the room, Mike Lovegood was getting up and approaching her. Deanna quailed before his gaze. His face was impassive, but his eyes flashed fire at her.

He came up to her, and gazed coldly into her eyes. "Take that back." he hissed at her.

Deanna trembled but was determined to show no fear. "No." she whispered softly.

Mike drew himself in. His eyes gleamed savagely. "You little..." He composed himself, before speaking in tones of cold disdain. "If you were a boy, you'd be fighting me off right now. But as it is... you're not worth the effort." A pregnant pause filled the air. Then...

"Get out." he said quietly. "Get out of my sight. You're a disgrace to the name of Slytherin. Well? What are you waiting for? GET OUT!" he roared at her. Deanna's nerve broke at this, and she ran for the exit into the rest of the school.

Luella watched in torment. She desperately wanted to run after her and comfort her, but a touch of Rianne's hand stopped her.

"Let her go." she murmured. "She's excelled herself this time; if you go running after her, you'll blow it all." Luella nodded mutely. She was close to tears. That had been an amazing bit of acting. If it had been acting. And Luella knew Deanna too well to be fooled by that. Holding herself quietly, she made for her dorm and the comforting feeling of Sooty on her lap.

It was much later when Deanna finally returned to the common room. It appeared deserted, for which Deanna was exceedingly grateful. She didn't think she could handle another confrontation like that. Feeling sick inside, she made for her dorm. However, before she reached the door, a voice stopped her progress.

"Wait up, Tyler." She recognised the voice instantly. Crabbe. She turned. There he was, sitting in the corner with his friends, Clarissa Parkinson and Marcus Goyle.

"What is it?" she asked suspiciously.

Crabbe beckoned her over. Curious, she went over to him and took the seat he indicated.

Crabbe and his friends were all looking at her with interest. "Did you mean it back then?" Crabbe asked with curiosity. "About Lovegood."

Deanna felt her heart leap. This was easier than she had ever dreamed of.

"Of course I meant it." she said, her self-assurance returning. "Can't stand her, never have. Her only redeeming feature was that she was good at Quidditch, but now she's not even got that." She forced herself to sneer.

All three of them were smiling evilly at each other. Deanna was not at all sure she liked the looks on their faces. Clarissa was speaking now.

"You're Caitlin Tyler's daughter, aren't you? The famous Auror."

Deanna nodded. Goyle took up the conversation. "When's your birthday, Tyler?"

"16th July." Deanna said, a trace of irritation colouring her words. "Why do you ask?"

"No reason." Goyle smiled. "So, can we take it you're not speaking to your little friends at the moment?"

"Doesn't look like it." Deanna said lightly. "They all think Marlene's wonderful."

Crabbe leaned close to her. "Well, they're obviously not very bright, then. We've never liked her either. Glad to see there's someone else whose Slytherin instincts are working." He smiled at her. "We've been watching you closely for a while now. And we think you've got potential. A lot of potential." He paused. Deanna waited with baited breath. What did he mean?

"Potential for what?" she asked, cautiously.

Crabbe smiled enigmatically. "Well, we don't think you're ready to know that yet. But we're quite impressed by you, Tyler. Hang around with us, you could learn a lot. Maybe get your own back on that Mike Lovegood and Lucas Vetinari." He flashed his teeth in a smile that had about as much warmth as a Siberian midwinter. Deanna smiled nervously. He was worrying her greatly. Nevertheless, in order to avenge Marlie, she had to get close to him.

She flashed him her brightest smile. "I'm sure I could. I've heard you're really clever."

Clarissa laughed quietly. Goyle grinned. Crabbe's features twisted into a leer.

"I like you more and more every time I see you, Tyler. Well, I daresay we'll talk more on this soon. Time we all turned in, I think." And with that, the conversation was at an end.

Luella and Rianne were waiting for her when she returned to her dorm. Rianne was gazing at her in awe. Luella, however, looked concerned.

"Deanna, are you OK?" she said, every word shot through with worry. "You looked really bad back then."

"I'm fine." Deanna said shortly.

Rianne seemed ecstatic. "Deanna, that was an amazing performance! You were wonderful. There's not a Slytherin here who doesn't think you hate Marlie now. Very convincing. Crabbe'll want you for his little gang in no time!"

Deanna nodded. "And how right you are. Approached me as I came in, told me how impressed with me he was. Wanted me to join his gang, said I had potential. I'm in there."

Rianne grinned widely. "Fantastic! All you have to do now is win his trust, turn on the old charm and he'll be confessing in no time! Should be no problem."

Luella did not share Rianne's joy. Deanna had an empty, desolate look in her eyes, and Luella feared for her.

"Deanna, are you sure you're OK?" she asked. "That was a pretty harrowing scene for all of us, it must have affected you pretty badly."

Deanna shrugged. "I told you, I'm fine. It'll take more than a few tantrums from Pretty Boy Lovegood to bother me. Now I'm going to bed. Goodnight." And with that, she drew the hangings shut. Rianne also retired to bed after that. Luella, however, lay awake with Sooty nestled on her purring for a long time after that. All was clearly not well with Deanna, but how to do anything about her? Deanna was stubborn, and prouder than Snape. Getting her to admit she was hurting was a near impossible task. Beyond even her at the moment.

The after-effects did not take long to become apparent. Lucas Vetinari had obviously had a council with the other boys, for none of them would even acknowledge Deanna. The older Slytherins were little kinder. Mike was a very popular figure and few of them had any sympathy for the upstart young first year. However, Crabbe and his gang went out of their way to be nice to Deanna, and she soon found herself spending most of her free time with them.

Relations with Luella and Rianne were not as good as they could be. Given that they were obliged to spend most of their time ignoring her, and thus were spending most of their time hanging around together, Deanna was beginning to feel very hacked off at both of them. Not to mention lonely. Crabbe and company might be talking to her, but it wasn't the same as having Luella to hang around with. Plus she was rapidly discovering that they were more than capable of beating her at her own game in vindictiveness. They were always making fun of weaker and less able children, including Chris Bryant and Luella, who they referred to as 'Mudbloods'. Deanna, brought up to believe that only Death Eaters used that term for Muggle-borns, found it sticking in her throat, especially directed at her own best friend.

"What have I become?" she whispered to Snowy one night as Luella and Rianne slept. "I'm calling my own best friend a Mudblood!" She wiped tears from her eyes, remembering what her mother had said to her before leaving her on the Hogwarts Express.

"Look after Luella." Caitlin had said. "You know she's special, you know she's our hope. And you know she's vulnerable. Look after her, she's not as strong as you are. She needs you." And Deanna had sworn to help her all she could. Now look at her. She'd hardly spoken to Lu in a week. And she'd actually used the term Mudblood. Deanna might be as manipulative as they come, but she had her scruples and right now every single one was lying in the dust in ruins. She had to shut her eyes when washing herself in the morning, in case she caught a glimpse of her reflection. The accusing look in her reflection's eyes was something she just couldn't face anymore.

The worst thing of all was not being able to talk to anyone about it. Crabbe and friends were right out. Rianne would be no help, just persuading her it was all for a good end. Luella she was too proud to confide in. Besides, she couldn't bear explaining to Luella that she'd referred to her as "that worthless little Mudblood in my dorm". Caitlin was a non-starter. She'd let her mother down very badly, and had no wish to endure the shame of explaining what she'd become. Melissa Lovegood would have done, but like Rianne, would be too focused on the practicalities to care about how Deanna was feeling. And she didn't trust Snape at all. Deanna began to wish

she'd had siblings, aunts, uncles. Any one of them would have done. But as it was, she had no one. She tickled Snowy under the chin.

"Who do I talk to, Snowy? Any ideas?" She held the cat close to her, enjoying the feel of soft, warm fur and Snowy's warm purring body. "You know, I hope your mum's properly grateful after all this, I don't put myself through all this for just anyone, you know." Then it hit her. Of course! Marlie! Hadn't she been calling out for her? Maybe somewhere Marlie would hear her and listen. She obviously didn't bear as much ill-will towards her as she had done. It was too late to see her now, but tomorrow, straight after Potions last thing, she made up her mind she would slip off to the hospital wing and see Marlie. Feeling much happier, she let Snowy go and curled up in bed. It was not long before she was fast asleep.

Potions passed all too slowly for Deanna. She was now alone on the corner desk, Luella having moved to Marlie's empty seat. Lucas Vetinari and Alex Lynch were seated at the desk in front. Lucas in particular regarded her with an icy sneer of contempt, although Alex gave her a sympathetic look while Lucas wasn't looking.

If Snape noticed the new seating arrangements, he did not say anything. However, as Deanna passed his desk on his way out, he stopped her.

"A word, Miss Tyler." Deanna froze. This was not good news. She hadn't actually done anything wrong, but Snape had a way of making her feel as if she had.

"Sir?" she asked nervously. Luella shot her a concerned look as she left, but was not given a chance to say anything.

Snape motioned her into his office. "I would like to discuss recent events with you. Do not worry. This will not take long." Her suspicions far from being allayed, Deanna followed him in and sat down.

"Miss Tyler, disturbing and strange rumours have reached my ears about you recently. Rumours concerning a fight in the Slytherin common room. About you turning away from your friends and socialising with Dexter Crabbe and his companions. Is this true?"

Deanna hung her head. She acknowledged that this was indeed the case.

Snape seemed mildly alarmed by this. Certainly, he did not seem pleased.

"You surprise me. I thought, after our conversation on the night Miss Lovegood was taken ill, you would be the last person to have anything to do with Crabbe. Certainly I find it hard to believe that you have abandoned your closest friend for him. An explanation would not go amiss, Miss Tyler." He regarded her severely.

Deanna gulped. She most certainly did not wish to tell him everything. However, some kind of answer was clearly required. And she simply couldn't think of a decent excuse. So she opted for the truth.

"I'm sorry, sir. I would tell you if I could, but I can't! I've got my reasons, though. Please believe me."

Snape raised an eyebrow. "At least you are not attempting to lie to me. However, I think that a more substantive reply is called for here. Don't you think so?"

Deanna looked at him in desperation. What to tell him? "Sir, believe me, I do care for my friends still. And I don't trust Crabbe. But..." She thought hard. "Sir," she said tentatively, "have you ever been in a situation where you know who you are and what you stand for, but for various reasons, you've been forced to act as though you are the complete opposite? That you've got a moral purpose, but have to act immorally in order to achieve it? Because that's me now. I know Crabbe's bad news, but for reasons of my own, I've got to hang around with him. I've got to be what I'm not in order to do what I need to. Do you understand me?" She gazed into his eyes, willing him please, please, understand. Please know what I'm talking about.

To her surprise, Snape's expression softened. His eyes met hers, and she was amazed to read there complete understanding.

"Yes, Deanna," he said quietly. "I have been in that situation myself. And I think I understand you." Deanna felt herself go limp with relief. "You do?"

"Oh yes. I think I know exactly what you are up to. And I respect you greatly for it. However, as someone who has been there before you, I feel bound to give you some advice." He leaned over the desk, his eyes burning intensely into hers. "Play a role all you like, but never forget that it is only a role. Never forget who you are and why you're doing what you're doing. Because there is always the danger that you will become too deeply part of what you are infiltrating, and suddenly you are no longer who you once were but someone completely different. And I do not think you will like what you become. Take care, Deanna." He sat back, still gazing at her with that direct, intense stare.

Deanna looked back in him. He was now beginning to worry her, no doubt about that. Yet strangely, she felt her earlier distaste for him fading. Instead, she now felt a certain bond with him, a certain intimacy. So he too had pretended to be bad for reasons of his own. Interesting.

"I think I know what you mean, sir," she said quietly. "And... don't worry. I'll be OK. I haven't forgotten what I'm doing it for."

Snape nodded. "Good. Because it would be a great loss to see you waste your talents. Is there anything else you want to tell me?"

Deanna shook her head. "I don't think so..." Then something did occur to her. "Sir, the not being able to look yourself in the mirror, does that ever go away?" A lump came into her throat.

Snape gazed at her almost tenderly. "I believe it does, when the guilt that caused it is removed. For you, I believe it will end when Miss Lovegood recovers and whoever poisoned her is punished."

"When did it go away for you?" Deanna asked. At this Snape lowered his eyes.

"As yet, I don't believe it has." he said softly. Then, the gentle, reflective mood seemed to pass, and he was his usual irascible self.

"Well, I think I've kept you talking for quite long enough.", he said irritably.

"Doubtless you have things you have to do. I shall see you again in Wednesday's lesson. Good day, Miss Tyler." And with that, he ushered her out.

Chapter Thirteen: A Meeting of Minds

Deanna lost no time in racing up to the hospital wing. Marlie had by this time been moved into a room of her own, as the other patients had complained about the noise. She was however quiet when Deanna went to see her. Lying very still and silent, her hair spread out on the pillow, Marlene's appearance could best be described as consumptive.

Deanna sat next to the bed and regarded her coolly.

"I hope you're satisfied with yourself, Marlie. Thanks to your naivety, I've lost all standing I ever had here." She was overcome with a rush of emotion, and burst into tears as all the unhappiness of the past few weeks overwhelmed her.

"Oh, Marlie!" she sobbed. "What am I going to do? You have no idea how bad it is, no idea... No one else will speak to me, I'm not hanging around with Lu anymore, and I have to spend all my free time with the bastard who poisoned you!" She wiped her eyes and composed herself.

"I'm ingratiating myself with Crabbe and company so I can get them to confess what they did to you. Your dad's building the tape recorder you designed so I can tape it and use it as evidence to get them expelled. Thing is though, I have to be around the most horrible people in Slytherin. And you know what? Everyone else thinks I'm like that too! Mike, he thinks I'm the lowest of the low. And you should see the looks Lucas Vetinari keeps giving me. Know what else?" Deanna said miserably. "I'm starting to believe it too! I called my own best friend a Mudblood, do you know that?" She held her head in her hands. "I'm so scared, Marlie, so scared! So scared I'll turn into one of them. Just so afraid. I wish you were awake, Marlie. Wish you were around. I know we never got on that well, but you're not so bad. Not really." She looked up and began to stroke Marlie's hair. Deanna smiled and began to look at Marlie almost fondly.

"You know, I'm beginning to realise exactly how important you were. I mean, Lu and Rianne, with them it's always work, work, work. You were the one who kept us entertained. Kept things fun. Gods damn it, Marlie, why did I never see it before? Our little Gang of Four falls apart without you. I always thought that if anything happened to you, it'd be me and Lu together and Ri on her own, but it's not happening is it? Instead, they're off together, and I'm the lonely one. Gods, Marlie, come back!"

Please." Her voice trailed into a whisper. She wiped away a tear that ran down her cheek.

Marlie stirred in her sleep. Her lips parted and suddenly she spoke.

"Don't cry." she whispered. Deanna started. "What?" she gasped.

"Deanna, don't cry. What is it? What's wrong?" Marlie whispered. Her eyes were shut, but Deanna sensed a change in her, almost as if she was closer to consciousness than she had been.

"Marlie," she began, her voice picking up, "can you hear me?"

"Course I can." Marlie muttered sleepily, "You're right here. You heard me well enough in the cellar, why not out here?"

If Deanna had been confused before, it was nothing compared to how she felt now.

"Cellar? What cellar? And we're inside, Marlie. In the hospital wing."

Marlie frowned in her sleep. "Can't be right." she whispered. "We're at my house, by the stream. And you were in our cellar. You were right there, you spoke to me, kept talking in riddles, but you let me out. You knew why I was here, you kept taunting me with it but wouldn't tell me. Don't you remember?"

Deanna shook her head. "No. I've never been to your house."

"Well you're right here. So that's not true." Marlie shifted position. "Where do you want me to come back to? Why were you crying? What's happening, Deanna? Tell me. I'm so confused."

"You're confused?" Deanna snapped. "You're the one saying we're at your house! Listen, you're asleep, you're dreaming. I don't know what's going on in your head, but I wish you'd bloody snap out of it. I want you to wake up, come back to Hogwarts. Please?"

"Why?" Marlie asked.

"Because..." Deanna stopped. There were a thousand and one reasons why she wanted Marlie back but none of them seemed right. In the end, she just let her heart guide her.

"Because I miss you." she said gently. Marlie's eyes flicked open suddenly as she gasped in astonishment. But she wasn't really awake, wasn't really seeing anything. They closed again.

"Do you really?" she asked, a smile playing around her lips.

"Yes!" Deanna said, feeling very uncomfortable with all this.

"Alright then." Marlie said calmly. "Hogwarts it is. I'm on my way." Suddenly, her eyes shot open again. A look of absolute shock took hold of her. "Deanna! Deanna, wait!" she cried.

"I'm here, I'm right here." Deanna said, her heart racing. She took hold of Marlie's arm, trying to calm her.

Marlie closed her eyes, now looking angry and fed up. "Where did you go? I wish you'd stop disappearing like that. Damn you, Tyler. First the cellar, now this. Damn you, damn..." Her voice trailed off into silence. Her body subtly changed and she was fast asleep again.

Deanna just stared in amazement. Had she been having a conversation with Marlie? It certainly seemed like it. But Marlie was meant to be trapped in her own head, incapable of interacting with the outside world. So how could she have been able to hear what Deanna was saying? And what did Marlie mean by the encounter in the cellar? She'd never even been to Marlie's house before, didn't even know they had a cellar. And as for having all the answers, that was laughable. She thought back to Luella talking about how Marlie had been demanding she tell her something. Maybe that was it, she'd appeared to her in the Lovegoods' cellar, trying to give her a clue as to what was going on, and Marlie thought she was seeing the dream Deanna again. Her mind reeling, she got to her feet. She needed to think, and then she needed to talk it over with someone who knew everything there was to know about potions. Snape.

Marlie raced out of her father's workshop as fast as she could, sobbing helplessly. Even her own father had fallen under Morticia's spell. Her father, who regarded her as the apple of his eye, his little princess, and not even he could resist the devil child's spell. Which left Marlie with precious few options. Her strategy in life had always been, if she couldn't sort it out herself, run to Dad. And for the very first time, it had failed her. Leonard Lovegood hadn't even recognised her. Adding insult to injury, he'd even stolen her idea for a Walkmage, and shared it with Morticia. That was meant to be me there! she thought, furious. Me sharing the plans with him, the two of us building it together. And now he's doing that with her! It wasn't fair, she thought, brushing the tears from her eyes.

She looked up. In her haste, she'd run to her favourite spot, the stream at the bottom of the Lovegood's garden where she'd frequently played with Mike and the Weasleys, and hidden when she wanted to be alone. And now she found she'd come here. Well, it made sense. This had always been her safe place. And she wanted nothing more right now than to be alone.

But she wasn't alone. As she neared the place, she saw a small black-clad figure hunched up by the stream. It was a dark-haired girl her own age. Crying. Silently, she drew nearer, wanting to find who this intruder, who'd dared invade her special place, was.

The girl was speaking aloud. Marlie gasped then sagged with relief as she recognised the voice. Deanna. Well, at least it was one person she could rely on. She still didn't

like her much, but she did at least trust her. She listened carefully and was surprised to hear her own name.

"Oh, Marlie!" she was sobbing. "What am I going to do? You have no idea how bad it is, no idea... No one else will speak to me, I'm not hanging around with Lu anymore, and I have to spend all my free time with the bastard who poisoned you!" She wiped her eyes and sniffed. Marlie looked on, bewildered. Poison? Who'd poisoned her?

"But I feel fine." she whispered softly. And why was Deanna lonely? What had she done to alienate even Luella? Marlie listened on.

"I'm ingratiating myself with Crabbe and company so I can get them to confess what they did to you." Deanna continued. Did what to me? Marlie wondered. Did he poison me? Marlie thought back. A memory was making itself felt. Crabbe drinking her health only a few days ago at the victory party. She hadn't trusted him then. Had the drink been poisoned? But why am I OK now? she thought, confused. Still, if I have been and Deanna's trying to befriend him to get a confession out of him, that would explain why she's so upset...

Deanna was still speaking. "Your dad's building the tape recorder you designed so I can tape it and use it as evidence to get them expelled."

So that was how he got the Walkmage plans! Marlie thought, cheering up. Deanna had sent them to him so he could build it, and then Deanna could tape a trick confession out of Crabbe. Very ingenious. Marlie felt a chill go up her spine suddenly. She was beginning to realise why her family didn't recognise her. I'm dead, she thought, horrified. I'm dead, and I'm a ghost. Which is why they all think I'm a stranger. And that Morticia's taken the opportunity to take my place now I'm not around. But that didn't explain why the Weasleys recognised her, and her mother had been able to imprison her. And it didn't even begin to account for Deanna being here.

"Thing is though, I have to be around the most horrible people in Slytherin." Deanna was weeping. "And you know what? Everyone else thinks I'm like that too! Mike, he thinks I'm the lowest of the low. And you should see the looks Lucas Vetinari keeps giving me. Know what else?" Deanna said miserably. "I'm starting to believe it too! I called my own best friend a Mudblood, do you know that?" She held her head in her hands. "I'm so scared, Marlie, so scared! So scared I'll turn into one of them. Just so afraid."

Marlie felt herself softening. Deanna seemed so unhappy. She felt like she should be gloating, but somehow she couldn't work up any enthusiasm. In fact, she was actually feeling sorry for her. Deanna seemed so frightened and lost. Such a change, seeing her like this.

"I wish you were awake, Marlie." Deanna cried out. "Wish you were around. I know we never got on that well, but you're not so bad. Not really." Marlie gasped. I'm asleep? No, I can't be. I'm awake. I'm here! Unless I'm dreaming. Which makes a lot of sense, but... Marlie shook her head. She couldn't fathom it out at all. Frowning, she walked over to Deanna and sat beside her. Deanna didn't seem to notice. She just kept talking. Addressing the air. Very odd. Talking to Marlie yet ignoring her.

"You know, I'm beginning to realise exactly how important you were. I mean, Lu and Rianne, with them it's always work, work, work. You were the one who kept us entertained. Kept things fun. Gods damn it, Marlie, why did I never see it before? Our little Gang of Four falls apart without you. I always thought that if anything happened to you, it'd be me and Lu together and Ri on her own, but it's not happening is it? Instead, they're off together, and I'm the lonely one. Gods, Marlie, come back! Please." Her voice trailed into a whisper. She wiped away a tear that ran down her cheek.

Marlie raised an eyebrow. She actually wanted her to come back? She actually missed her? Well, if that wasn't a miracle, nothing was. Deanna must be seriously unhappy. Marlie grinned to herself. About time Deanna saw the error of her ways. So why didn't she feel triumphant? In fact, reluctant as she was to admit it, she actually wanted nothing more to reach out and give Deanna a hug.

"Don't cry." she said softly. Deanna started. "What?" she gasped. She looked up and turned to face Marlie. Marlie gasped in surprise. Deanna seemed pale, almost transparent. In fact, Marlie could see the stream through her. As if she wasn't really here at all. Quite unlike everyone else Marlie had encountered, and definitely nothing like she'd been in the cellar earlier. There, she'd been real enough to touch.

"Deanna, don't cry. What is it? What's wrong?" Marlie whispered. The look of shock on Deanna's face was frightening her. What? she thought. You were talking to me, I'm here, don't look at me like that!

"Marlie," she began, her voice picking up, "can you hear me?"

"Course I can." Marlie snapped, "You're right here. You heard me well enough in the cellar, why not out here?"

Deanna's face was a very picture of confusion. Well, thank the gods I'm not the only one who hasn't got a clue what's happening, Marlie thought.

"Cellar? What cellar? And we're inside, Marlie. In the hospital wing."

Marlie frowned at her. Hogwarts hospital wing? She looked about her. No, definitely her childhood haunt by the stream. "Can't be right." she said, shaking her head. "We're at my house, by the stream. And you were in our cellar. You were right there, you spoke to me, kept talking in riddles, but you let me out. You knew why I was here, you kept taunting me with it but wouldn't tell me. Don't you remember?"

Deanna shook her head. "No. I've never been to your house."

Marlie threw up her hands in frustration. Couldn't Deanna see where she was? "Well, you're right here. So that's not true." Deanna didn't react. Marlie sighed and decided to change the subject. Deanna obviously wasn't aware of either their earlier encounter or where she was now. "Where do you want me to come back to? Why were you crying? What's happening, Deanna? Tell me. I'm so confused." Marlie looked at her with frustration.

"You're confused?" Deanna snapped. "You're the one saying we're at your house! Listen, you're asleep, you're dreaming. I don't know what's going on in your head, but I wish you'd bloody snap out of it. I want you to wake up, come back to Hogwarts. Please?"

"Why?" Marlie asked. She waited patiently. Might as well pump Deanna for as much information as she could while she was here.

"Because..." Deanna stopped. She seemed lost for words. Her eyes were a melting-pot of emotions.

"Because I miss you." she said gently. Marlie's jaw dropped, but she quickly composed herself. Now she couldn't resist gloating.

"Do you really?" she asked, a smile playing around her lips.

"Yes!" Deanna said, looking very uncomfortable with all this.

"Alright then." Marlie said calmly. "Hogwarts it is. I'm on my way." After all, there didn't seem to be anything left for her here. And her Cleansweep could probably make the journey in six hours or so. Not including breaks. And she wasn't unwilling to see the place again. Quite apart from anything else, it would be good to see Deanna in the flesh and get some answers out of her. She reached out to take Deanna's arm and gasped as her hand went straight through her. Then she noticed that Deanna was fading rapidly.

"Deanna!" she cried. "Deanna, wait!" But it was too late. Deanna had gone. Marlie pounded the ground in fury. "Where did you go? I wish you'd stop disappearing like that. Damn you, Tyler. First the cellar, now this. Damn you, damn you!" Her voice trailed off. Deanna was gone. She lay back on the warm grass, her mind reeling. What had just happened? She tried to make sense of it all. Deanna hadn't seemed here, hadn't seemed real. And she hadn't seemed to be aware of anything going on around her, except Marlie. She'd also had no memory of their previous encounter in the cellar.

Marlie pursed her lips, thinking deeply. Deanna had said she'd been poisoned. By Crabbe, and she was going undercover to get the evidence necessary to punish him. She'd also said that she, Marlie, was asleep, was dreaming, and not able to wake, presumably as an effect of the poison. Marlie fell to considering this. It made a weird kind of sense. After all, dreams were by their very nature weird. And her recent experiences definitely qualified as bizarre by any standards. It was rather cheering to know that out there somewhere were her real friends and family, and that they really recognised her. Another thought. If that was so, and all this was just a product of her own mind, then maybe, just, maybe, the Deannas she'd met were not the same person. The first was a Dream Deanna, trying to help her realise what was happening without actually doing all the work for her. The second was different. In fact, she could well believe that the second time was the real Deanna, who'd somehow managed to break through into the dream and tell her what was really going on.

"So I'm dreaming this." Marlie said in wonder. "Wow." It made sense. But how to wake up? Maybe that was what the first Deanna had meant. She had work out where

she was, what her task was and who Morticia was. Well, she was no nearer to understanding Morticia's identity. But she now knew where she was, and had an inkling of her task.

"I've got to wake up." she said firmly. "I have to find my way out of here. But how?" She gazed desperately at her reflection in the stream. It held still for a moment, then the rushing water shattered it. It reformed just as quickly. Marlie's jaw dropped. Instead of her own face, she saw Deanna smiling back at her. She winked at her before the reflection vanished, to be replaced with her own again. Marlie stared, but that was definitely her own face once more. Deanna was gone again. However, it gave Marlie hope. She was on the right track. This was nothing more or less than her own mind. She wished Luella were here. She seemed to have a very firm grasp of human behaviour and could easily help her to unravel the mysteries of her psyche. However, there was a Deanna helping her, and it seemed she was on the right track so far. She picked Snowy up and stroked him thoughtfully.

"Deanna said she wanted me back at Hogwarts." she said. Well, there must be an inner Hogwarts here. And maybe a Dream Luella to help her. And if Luella wouldn't come to her, she'd go to her.

Marlie leapt to her feet, her mind made up. "Come on, Snowy." she crooned. "You and I are off to Hogwarts." And with that, she headed back to the house to get her broom.

Deanna raced out of the hospital wing as fast as she could. Hoping against hope that Snape was still in his office, she made straight for the Slytherin corridor.

Her luck was in. Snape's classroom was empty, but knocking on his office door produced a reply. Snape flung the door open, scowling.

"What is it... You again?" He seemed less than pleased to see her. "May I inquire as to what is so important that you feel the need to break my door down?"

"Sir," she gasped, clutching her chest. "sir, it's Marlie!"

Snape's expression changed immediately from one of annoyance to one of alarm.

"Miss Lovegood? How is she?" he said sharply.

"Sir, she's still asleep, but... I was talking to her!" Deanna said, eyes wide. "And... she answered! In her sleep! She knew what I was saying to her! She could hear me!"

Snape looked stunned. "You had better come inside." he said curtly. Deanna followed him in and sat down. Corvus fluttered over to her and landed on her shoulder, cawing softly. Deanna stroked him absently and looked around her.

Snape's office was unchanged, except for one thing which she'd not noticed before in her nervousness. On the desk in the corner, a massive array of glassware and a bubbling cauldron clearly indicated that Snape was brewing something up.

"What's that?" Deanna asked.

"A potion." Snape said shortly.

"Which one?" Deanna asked, not to be put off.

"An antidote."

"What, for Marlie? I didn't know Sleeping Death had one." Deanna said, curious.

"It doesn't. Yet." Snape couldn't resist a little boasting.

"Have you found one?" Deanna asked, excitedly.

"Maybe. That is what I was working on before I was so rudely interrupted. Now. Tell me about this conversation you had with Miss Lovegood." Snape leaned forward, listening intently.

Deanna told him everything. When she had finished, Snape sat back and looked thoughtful.

"Well?" Deanna said breathlessly. "What do you think? Is she waking up?"

"Maybe. Maybe not." Snape said calmly. "This is an unexpected development, but not an uncommon one. I have heard of it happening before in some instances. Where a person in a Sleeping Death trance has been able to communicate briefly with someone else."

"And?" Deanna said, barely able to contain herself.

"I gather it occurs when the Sleeper's level of consciousness rises and becomes closer to wakefulness. However, most of the responsibility lies with the one with whom the Sleeper makes contact. Apparently they are able to project themselves into the Sleeper's dream and have some effect on events there. This takes quite a bit of magical effort, although some manage it without even realising. It makes things easier if there is a strong emotional connection between the two of them." He was now regarding Deanna with a great deal of interest.

Deanna began to feel rather nervous. "But sir, I didn't even know what was happening. I didn't even leave my body, I was just talking to her in the hospital wing."

Snape nodded. "Understandable. I would have been very surprised if you had consciously done it. Nevertheless, Miss Lovegood clearly experienced you appearing in her dream and could communicate with you. Admittedly, it was only briefly, and the contact was not a strong one, but it was there. And it was most impressive for an eleven year old." Snape was regarding her intently. "You must have a very close emotional bond with Miss Lovegood."

Deanna laughed. "Well... it's an interesting one. Up until Halloween, I couldn't stand her."

"And yet you are now sacrificing everything to avenge her." Snape said thoughtfully.

"She's hurt. I want revenge." Deanna said simply.

"Why?"

"Because..." Deanna hesitated. "Because she may be a spoilt, manipulative brat who routinely drives me up the wall, but that doesn't mean I don't care about her."

Snape smiled thinly. "You see. She evokes strong and conflicting emotions in you; you hate her one minute, the next you want revenge on her behalf. It is precisely these connections that allow one to intervene in a Sleeping Death trance. Doubtless she feels much the same way about you, or else she would not have allowed you in. Also, it would appear that her own inner Deanna Tyler is acting as her Guide."

"Guide?" Deanna asked, confused.

"A regular part of successful Sleeping Death trances. The Sleeper meets all those with whom she has an emotional bond, and most of them prove hostile to her in some way. However, one proves to be an asset, a helper, who provides assistance and advice along the way, often getting the Sleeper out of tricky situations and providing clues as to what is going on, although never doing all the work for them. Very often, it is not the one who the Sleeper actually likes best, but the one for whom the connection is strongest. It is someone who has the qualities the Sleeper most needs in order to succeed. And surprisingly often, it's someone who they have classed as an enemy." Snape was regarding Deanna with great interest now.

"So she's picked me to help her with her dreams." Deanna said, flatly.

"It would appear so. Another reason you were able to intrude."

"But what does it mean? I mean, now what?" Deanna said, intrigued.

"For us, very little. For her, it may mean the difference between life and death. You have managed to communicate to her that she is asleep and dreaming, and needs to wake up. You would be surprised how difficult it is for Sleeping Death victims to realise that. And yet, it's an essential part of recovering."

Deanna still had one question left unanswered. "Sir, if I was able to do that... what does that mean for me? I mean, do I have special powers or what?"

Snape's earlier irritability returned. "Miss Tyler, I would strongly advise you not to get carried away by the idea of having supernormal abilities. You are a witch. That should be enough for you. Now go, I need to work on my antidote."

Marlie strode purposefully across the Lovegoods' lawn, Snowy in tow. Now that she had an objective in view and was not merely a pawn of capricious fate, she felt strangely confident. In fact, every inch of her being crackled with power.

"I'm ready for you, Morticia." she whispered. For she was becoming certain that waking up would involve defeating the devil child. However, despite her words, she wasn't completely ready for a confrontation just yet.

Which was a shame, because seated on the veranda was the very person. Sitting on the swing chair, kicking backwards and forwards, a horrible parody of girlish innocence, was Morticia, grinning insanely.

Marlie stopped dead. Drawing out her wand, she approached slowly, ready to fight if she had to.

"Out of my way, Morticia." Marlie said grimly.

Morticia giggled. "No." she said.

Marlie glared at her. "Don't make me do anything you'll regret, Tish." she said, in what she hoped was a threatening voice.

Morticia laughed all the harder. "Threatening me, are you? You'll have to do better than that. You don't have the power to unseat me, and we both know it. Give in while you're still unharmed." She smiled fetchingly. Marlie wasn't fooled.

"Never." she said coldly. "I'd never give in to you."

Morticia's smile faded, to be replaced with a look of pure, cold anger. "You will." she said softly. "It's happening already. You won't last forever, Marlene. Eventually, there will come a time when Deanna can't save you, and that cat can't rouse you. And then..." She paused. The manic grin had returned. "Then the tables will be turned, and instead of being your prisoner and scapegoat, I'll have my rightful place. In charge!" She laughed.

Marlie sighed. She had never been impressed by bad guys bragging about their plans, and right now she was too impatient to even bother faking any enthusiasm.

"Ah, to Hades with you, Tish!" she snapped. "Can't you see I've got things to do?" And with that she waved her wand with the first spell that came to her.

"*Wingardium Leviosa!*" she cried. The charm hit Morticia full-on. Her laughter turned to cries of alarm as she began floating in the air. Marlene grinned. True, it wasn't as good as Deanna's efforts, which could make things go flying around, but it wasn't at all bad considering.

Morticia was furious. "You wait, Lovegood, I'll get you back for this! You might have won the battle, but you'll lose the war!" She was clutching on to a pillar, desperately trying not to crash into the roof. Marlie just grinned. Nice to see not everything going Morticia's way for once.

"See ya, Tish! Wouldn't want to be ya!" Marlie called, as she ran past into the house. She vaguely heard Morticia laughing and calling "Too late!" but thought nothing of it as she pushed the door open and darted in.

And pulled up with a start. This wasn't the Lovegoods' hall. It was bigger than the Lovegoods' entire house. She stared around, taking in the suits of armour, the banners, and the huge staircase that dominated the room. This was...

"Hogwarts?" she breathed incredulously. For indeed it was. No doubt about it, she somehow managed to Apparate directly to the Hogwarts Entrance Hall. Which could only mean one thing.

"Deanna was right!" she whispered. "I am dreaming!" Which had interesting implications. Evidently, she did have a great deal of control over events, more than she'd thought. It all made sense. Lost and lonely in the mist, she'd longed for company and Snowy had come. Then she'd wanted nothing more than to go somewhere warm and familiar, so she'd ended up in her childhood nursery. Hunting for her mother, she'd found her virtually straight away. In the cellar, she'd thought of the Weasleys cheering her up, and they'd appeared. And she'd called on Deanna for help, and she'd come. Now she'd wanted to go to Hogwarts, so here she was. Marlie wondered what sort of limits there were to this. Oh, the possibilities...

The place seemed deserted. Glancing out of the window, she saw it was night outside. So after curfew then. Taking advantage of being out, she decided to explore. It would make a nice change to see Hogwarts by night.

She walked for ages along the corridors. Nothing appeared different. A few ghosts drifted past her, but nothing else of note occurred. She was wandering down the Charms corridor, heading for Ravenclaw Tower, reputed to be the location of the Ravenclaw common room, when she nearly tripped over something. She turned, coming face-to-face with Mrs. Norris, dust-coloured cat of Argus Filch, Hogwarts caretaker.

Marlie cursed quietly. Even though she was a devoted cat lover, she found it hard to like Mrs. Norris.

"Get away from here." she hissed. "Shoo!"

The cat did not move. A tapestry on the far wall did though, as Filch himself turned up.

"Ah-ha!" he laughed dementedly. "Thought you'd go prowling around at night, did you? Thought you'd escape did you? Well, tough! No one gets away from old Filch that easily! Come on, you and I are off to see your House Head!"

Great, Marlie thought. I now have to deal with Dream Snape on top of everything else. Impatient suddenly, she cried out "Salazar Slytherin, greatest of the Hogwarts Four, help your daughter!"

She got her wish. The Slytherin ghost, a dour figure known as the Bloody Baron, drifted lazily through a wall.

"What is all this commotion?" he rumbled. Filch immediately leapt a foot into the air and began trembling.

"I'm taking a student to see Professor Snape. She's out of bounds." He seemed determined not to let the Baron frighten him. The Baron did not appear impressed.

"Out of bounds? In her own realm? No place here is closed to her, surely you know that? Let her go, you foolish little man."

Filch seemed to inflate with fury. "Foolish little... Salazar Slytherin, greatest of the Hogwarts Four, help your son!"

All three of them paused. Nothing happened. The Baron broke the silence.

"Salazar only sends his aid to those worthy of it. Those who are properly developing their power. Not Squibs like you." the Baron said contemptuously. He idly waved his hand and Peeves appeared. Laughing manically, he immediately began throwing water bombs around, causing Filch to scream in rage and desperately try to clean up. The Baron drifted away, and Marlie followed, glad of a reprieve. However, she turned to look a little more closely at Peeves and saw with horror that he had Morticia's face. She quickly moved away, after the Baron.

"Thank you!" she gasped as they turned the corner.

The Baron regarded her with a look almost of amusement. "Thank you? Why, I merely answered your call. This is your realm, you have the power here. Use it and you will prosper. Allow others to use it for you and you will suffer." He fell silent.

Marlie was still puzzled. "Why did Peeves have Morticia's face?"

The Baron allowed himself a smile. "Morticia and Peeves are kin to each other. Both have power, yet are out of control with no one to guide them. Peeves, luckily for us all, has me, and I can deploy him to great effect. I could not have saved you without him. I keep him in check, so he can interact with the world effectively, and he gives me power, that I may do the same. Morticia is in much the same position."

"But who keeps Morticia in check?" Marlie whispered softly. The Baron smiled thinly.

"I would have thought the answer to that is obvious." he said smugly and drifted away.

"Wait!" Marlie called, but it was too late. The Bloody Baron drifted through a shield bearing the Ravenclaw crest and out of sight. Marlie cursed in frustration. Turning away, she headed back for the Great Hall and the entrance to the dungeons. She had no wish to run into Filch, although now she'd seen him off once, she felt it was unlikely her inner self would choose to use him again. Question was, what would it do to her next?

Chapter Fourteen: Unravelling The Web

It did not take long to find her common room. The Charms corridor turned, and she automatically found herself in the Slytherin Corridor. Marlie grinned. This really wasn't so bad, being trapped in her own psyche, you know. It had its benefits, and Morticia seemed to have taken a back seat. Maybe that Levitation Charm was still holding her back.

The common room was deserted, so she headed for her dorm. She was surprised to find Luella and Rianne sitting in front of the fire, playing chess. They looked up and to Marlie's relief, welcomed her as if nothing had happened.

"Hiya, Marlie." Rianne said cheerfully.

"How've you been?" Luella asked, then cursed as Rianne took advantage of the distraction to take one of her bishops.

"Not bad." Marlie replied. She looked at the chess board. "Who's winning?" There seemed to be rather a lot of white pieces around and not very many black ones.

"Me." Rianne said deftly.

"Yes, the shadow pieces are being held back most effectively at the moment." Luella commented, and Marlie had the feeling that she was not talking about the game. She looked around.

"Where's Deanna?" Marlie asked.

"Busy." Rianne said. "She can't be looking out for you all day."

"Yes, we've all got better things to do than help you psychoanalyse yourself, Marlie." Luella said primly.

"What, like lose at chess?" Marlie grinned.

Luella laughed, then went serious. "If I lose this chess match, all that happens is I lose the match. If you lose yours, we will all cease to exist." She moved one of her rooks. "Tell us how you've been getting on."

So Marlie told them everything that had happened to her. "So now I know this is a dream, and I've got to wake up. But how? And where does Morticia fit in to all this?"

Rianne raised an eyebrow. "You don't know who she is yet? The Baron as good as told you."

"He said she was like Peeves, but I don't know whose job it is to keep her in line." Marlie said, frowning. "If only I knew, then I could get them to call her off."

Luella sighed. "Marlie, are you thinking at all? Who has the power here? Whose realm is this, whose dream? Who has Morticia told you her jailer is?" She gave Marlie her most penetrating Snape Interrogation look. "Think, woman!" she snapped.

Marlie went numb with shock. "You don't seriously mean..." she whispered staring at them both.

Rianne and Luella nodded in unison. Marlie stammered, "But it can't be, I mean, surely... You can't possibly mean me!"

Rianne and Luella broke into grins. "By George, I think she's got it!" Luella said.

"I think she has!" Rianne smiled. "And leave Weasley out of this, he's got nothing to do with it." Luella rolled her eyes.

Marlie was having difficulty coming to terms with this. "But how?" she gasped. "I mean, I don't have power over her, surely? She won't listen to me at all!"

Rianne was dismissive yet kindly. "Of course she doesn't. For eleven years you've been keeping her locked away because you're ashamed of her. Now you can't hold her in anymore, and she's busy taking her revenge."

Luella patiently elaborated. "Think how you'd feel if someone you cared about kept you a prisoner and didn't let you out for eleven years because they didn't think you were good enough for anyone else to know about. Imagine how hurt and angry you'd feel. And imagine what sort of mood you'd be in when you finally got free. That's how Morticia feels now. And it's what you have to deal with if you're going to get free yourself."

Marlie's head was in a whirl. "You mean she's part of me?"

"Of course she is, would she be here if she wasn't?" Rianne snapped. "Think! Remember what Deanna told you. All the clues she gave you."

"Sukey, Mike and Dad didn't even recognise me, they thought she was the real Marlie." Marlie said, choking.

"Exactly." Luella said. "You've been holding back a vital, powerful, part of yourself for so long, you've forgotten who you really are. You no longer even think Morticia's part of you. Which is why your own family don't recognise you anymore. They think Morticia's really you, because you've spent so long pretending to be someone else, you don't know who you are anymore! Consequently, neither do they! Tish is realer than you."

Marlie thought back to Morticia's words. "Ignore her Daddy, she's not important. She's not the real Marlie, she doesn't know how to be. Not any more." It made sense. But which bit of her was she?

"What about everyone else?" Rianne asked her.

"Well," Marlie hesitated. "Mum knew who I was, but blamed me for what Morticia did wrong."

"And?" Luella asked. "What does that tell you? Now you know she's part of you."

"I am responsible for her, aren't I?" Marlie sighed, remembering the Baron's words. "She can't control herself, so I have to do it, stop her from misbehaving."

Rianne and Luella looked at her, pleased. "Yes. You're right." Luella smiled. "Who else is there?"

Marlie thought. "The Weasleys recognised me, but they preferred Morticia." she said softly.

"See?" Rianne smiled. "They see what you're keeping prisoner. And they actually like that other side of you! What does that tell you?"

"They've got no taste?" Marlie suggested.

"No. Try again." Rianne said.

"Er..." Marlie thought. Then it came to her. The words stuck in her throat, but she forced herself to say them.

"Morticia has her good points. She's not completely worthless." she said dully.

Luella and Rianne smiled. "Well done." Luella said gently. "Of course she's not useless, she is buried treasure. Power which you need but which you've denied for so long you don't know how to use anymore. Which is a shame because Morticia could wake you up in an instant."

"Then what?" Rianne said. "Who did you encounter after the Weasleys?"

"Deanna." Marlie said quietly. "She gave me a whole load of clues which I found completely unhelpful at the time, but let me out of the cellar after I worked out that the very things I hated most about her were the ones I most envied."

"Which qualities were those?" Luella asked.

"Emotional honesty. Integrity. Not manipulating my loved ones into making my life easy for me. Knowing I wasn't perfect. Not trying to pretend I was." Marlie said, dully.

"And why do you need them?" Rianne asked.

"Because acting how I have been is what's spawned Morticia." Marlie replied. "Had I been true to myself in the first place, she wouldn't hate me. She wouldn't even be separate, she'd be part of me."

"She isn't separate." Luella said firmly. "She's still part of you. You need to come to some sort of arrangement with her if you want to live. Because she is the only one

who can send you home. And if you don't go home soon, your physical body will die. You will die." Luella's eyes seemed strangely bright.

Rianne took up the conversation. "Listen to me, Marlie. You're doing well and you're reclaiming much of your power. But you are not all-powerful. Morticia is still held back by your charm, and as a result, you are able to draw on a good deal of her power. But when she breaks free, as she surely will soon, that power will be hers again, and she will come after you stronger than before. While she is chained, you are real, and you have power. When she breaks free, she takes over and she is realer than you. Do you get what I'm driving at?" Rianne looked desperate. And in that instant, Marlie understood.

"You won't recognise me!" she whispered. "When she gets out, you won't know who I am anymore!"

Rianne and Luella nodded grimly. "When she's around, we'll all think she's the real you. Unless and until you can bring this fight to an end. That is your task, and your only hope of survival. We are counting on you, Marlie." Luella looked at her intently.

Marlie opened her mouth to respond but was distracted by the door opening. All three turned as Morticia walked in, her Hogwarts cloak swirling about her. All girlishness gone from her, she now wore her hair loose, a Hogwarts uniform which Marlie vaguely noticed had Gryffindor colours and a cold unfathomable look on her face. Luella and Rianne immediately smiled at her, forgetting Marlie completely.

"Hey, Marlie." Rianne smiled.

"You're out late tonight." Luella remarked.

"I got held up." Morticia said simply. "Someone kept me hanging around for ages." She showed no trace of amusement at this choice of phrase. "I'm tired. Let's turn in." With that, she climbed into Marlie's bed and drew the curtains. Luella and Rianne extinguished the fire without a word and climbed into their own beds. However, just before she drew the curtains, Luella turned, looked penetratingly into Marlie's eyes for just an instant then went to bed. Marlie, left alone, and suddenly dog-tired, clambered into Deanna's vacant bed and fell asleep.

Snape regarded Marlene's sleeping form for a while. His experimental antidote appeared to be having the desired effect so far, but would it be enough? Deanna's tale of Marlene responding to her in sleep was encouraging, but was it an indicator of Marlene's health or Deanna's as yet undeveloped powers? Certainly, Deanna did have a great deal of potential. Snape had every intention of keeping a very close watch on her, and not just because of the debt he owed to Caitlin. His interest in Deanna went beyond the purely personal. However, it was Melissa's daughter that concerned him now.

He studied her carefully. Certainly she was improving. However, she showed few signs of waking. And he had no idea how to improve the antidote. It was doing all it

could to empower Marlene's desire to live, and inhibit the death instincts. But would it be enough? Snape knew Melissa well enough to know that she would accept nothing less than Marlene's recovery. If she died... Snape did not want to think about Melissa's reaction. The thought of hearing all his secrets made public most emphatically did not appeal. And not just for his sake alone. There were other, innocent, victims who would suffer most dearly if all about his past was known. One face in particular kept crossing his mind. No, for her sake, if no one else's, he had to help Marlene. But how? It wasn't like he could enter her dream and help her fight from within, after all.

But Deanna had managed it, a little voice inside said. She could go in and help her. Especially if she had... assistance.

But that ritual is extremely complex. Hardly anyone's managed it! Snape thought. Granted, he could brew the necessary potions, but the spells required were beyond him. Only someone highly skilled at Charms could do it. Indeed, he only knew of two people who could accomplish such a feat, and one had been killed by Voldemort years ago. Which just left...

"Caitlin." he whispered. The thought of seeing his old schoolfriend again brought mixed feelings. On the one hand, his heart sang with joy at the thought of seeing her once more. On the other, his mind felt ill at the prospect. Given their past, how would Caitlin react to seeing him again? Especially given that he needed her to perform a risky and highly tricky ritual involving her only child. Nevertheless, there was no one else. Sighing, he got up and left. Time to send Corvus to her.

Caitlin patted her friend's arm sympathetically. She and Melissa were seated in Caitlin's front room, drinking herbal tea and talking. Well, Melissa was doing the talking, Caitlin was offering a sympathetic ear. Caitlin regarded Melissa with concern. Normally so calm, the DDAE Head was sitting hunched up on Caitlin's sofa, staring into space and crying. With her black velvet cloak draped over her shoulders and the smart Muggle business suit she usually wore underneath riding up around her neck, Melissa Lovegood looked more like a frightened child than the magical community's most feared Auror.

"I don't know what I'm going to do, Caitlin!" Melissa wept. "Every time I think of Marlie lying there like that, I just feel so helpless! I mean, Dark Arts Defence is meant to be my speciality, isn't it? So why can't I stop something like this happening to my own daughter?"

Caitlin soothed her gently. "It's not your fault, Mel. She was at Hogwarts, she's not your responsibility while she's there. Everyone understands that."

"Do they now." Melissa said sceptically. "Try telling that to Marcus Vetinari. He's always been after my job, and now he's got proof I'm not up to it. Laetitia and Lucas are fine, aren't they? He didn't let them get poisoned!"

"Laetitia and Lucas have far fewer enemies and rather more personal power than Marlie." Caitlin interrupted. "Take it as a credit to her skill, if not her wits, that someone thought she was worth the trouble."

"Exactly!" Melissa snapped. "Why didn't she realise that and take precautions? Has she learnt nothing?"

"Mel, she's eleven." Caitlin said gently. "She's not had any of the experiences or training you've had. How was she to know? She thought she was safe at Hogwarts. Go easy on her, she's just a kid."

"Safe at Hogwarts." Melissa said grimly. "That's what they always say. You're perfectly safe when Albus Dumbledore's around." She looked wildly at Caitlin. "How did he let this happen? How did Severus let this happen? If she dies, I will never forgive either of them." She looked furious. Caitlin shifted uncomfortably. To this day, she still felt uncomfortable at the mention of Snape's name. Their past was still too tangibly real for her liking. At least she didn't have to actually see him at all.

Their attention was distracted by a scratching at the window. A large raven was sitting there with a letter attached to it.

"Caitlin." Melissa said casually. "You've got a letter." Caitlin felt her mouth go dry. Very few people used crows and ravens as familiars, and she personally knew only one person who did. Snape. Trembling, she got up and opened the window. The bird flew in, dropped the letter, and settled itself on Caitlin's shoulder, cawing gently in her ear.

Melissa regarded the letter, an odd gleam in her eyes. "Well, Caitlin. Aren't we the popular one? Going to open it? See what your ex has to say for himself?" She sneered the last sentence. Caitlin felt herself go red.

"He is not my ex!" she snapped, ripping the envelope open. Melissa watched her read it. Caitlin went pale and sank into a chair. "Read that." she whispered. Melissa took the letter off her and read.

Dear Caitlin,

As I'm sure you are aware, Marlene Lovegood is currently in a coma in Hogwarts hospital wing as a result of having imbibed the Sleeping Death potion. You may also be aware that Melissa has instructed me to research a cure. As yet, I've not found anything guaranteed to work, although I have produced a few extra strength antidotes that appear to be slowly improving her condition. However, there is one thing I have come across that may be effective. I believe you are aware of the Dream Weaver Ritual?

Melissa looked up, startled. "Dream Weaver?" she gasped. "Is he serious? That's incredibly dangerous! Not to mention difficult to perform. And who is he suggesting take part in the ritual?"

"Read the rest of it." Caitlin said with difficulty. Melissa did so.

I need your assistance in two things. Firstly, as one highly skilled at Charm work and a very experienced Auror, I need you to help me perform the ritual itself. While more than capable of brewing the appropriate potions, the actual charm work is beyond even me. Thus the need for your help.

Secondly, however, I need you to consent to the ritual's performance. You are aware that the Dream Weaver Ritual involves someone entering the dreams of a person that they are emotionally close to. After much thought, I have concluded that the most suitable candidate is your daughter Deanna.

"Deanna?" Melissa gasped. "He's not serious! I thought Deanna and Marlene hated each other? And for a mere child to undertake Dream Weaver... And to ask that it be yours! Hasn't he done you enough harm without asking that?"

Caitlin had her head in her hands. "Finish it, Mel." she said softly.

I fully realise that you may well be reluctant to allow your onlychild's participation in such a complex and dangerous ritual, however I beg that you hear my reasons and consider my request. Deanna has already managed to spontaneously project herself partially into Marlene's dream state and communicate with her briefly. She clearly has the natural talent to accomplish this feat. Also, after analysing Marlene's utterances while in trance, and talking with Deanna myself, I have come to the conclusion that Marlene has taken Deanna as her guide. Deanna therefore will likely find it much easier to enter the dreaming than any other person would, and is likely to be more successful in rousing her.

I will of course take all proper precautions during the ritual, and ensure that we can retrieve Deanna should anything go wrong. I will also respect the wishes of both Deanna and you in this matter and will not go ahead with this undertaking should either of you not wish it. However, for Marlene Lovegood's sake, I hope you will consider it.

I look forward to hearing from you soon.

*Best wishes,
Severus*

Melissa laid the letter down in shock. "Deanna made contact?" she whispered, tears threatening to come again. She turned to Caitlin. "Well? Are you going to do it?"

Caitlin shook her head. "I don't know, Melissa. I really don't. I mean..." Her eyes flashed with fury. "After all these years, to hear nothing from him, then he thinks he can just walk back into my life without so much as a by your leave and demand I risk my daughter's sanity just like that..!" She snapped her fingers. "Of all the arrogant, self-centred... Well he can think again. There is no way Deanna is going through something like that."

Melissa didn't respond. She just looked at Caitlin reproachfully. Caitlin looked back at her.

"What? Don't look at me like that. I'm not risking my daughter just so he can have the kudos of inventing a cure for Sleeping Death. I'm not." Caitlin said gruffly.

"So your pride and hurt feelings are more important than my daughter's life." Melissa said quietly. Caitlin caught the thinly veiled meaning all too clearly. "Come on, Caitlin!" Melissa said desperately. "You know what Severus is like! There are roaches out there with better interpersonal skills than him! Doesn't mean he doesn't care about you. Or Deanna, for that matter. His heart is in the right place. Anyway, remember his pride. He wouldn't be asking you if he thought there was another way, of that I am certain."

Caitlin wavered. Melissa did have a point. She read through the letter again. Snape's tone was civil and surprisingly humble. Pleading, almost. It didn't seem like he was doing it out of spite. And it wasn't as if it was just her and Deanna to think about. When you came right down to it, Marlie's life was at stake here. And if Deanna was capable of entering Marlene's dreams and helping her, then she couldn't really refuse.

"Damn you both, Mel!" she snapped. "You and Severus, you always knew exactly how to get round all my defences. All right, I'll do it. But if Severus expects any emotional warmth from me, he can think again. I'm doing this for your sake and Marlie's, Mel, and no one else's!"

Melissa smiled. It was always easy enough to talk Caitlin into something, if you knew how. And she had no doubts that for all her animosity towards Snape, Caitlin would manage to work with him well enough. After all, they'd been good friends once. And given the different circumstances now, she was sure they could be again. As Caitlin scribbled a reply for Corvus to take back to Hogwarts, Melissa sipped her herbal tea. Things were looking up.

The following day found Severus Snape frantically going through his wardrobe looking for a set of robes that would impress Caitlin. Her response had been non-committal, merely asking him to meet her that evening in the Three Broomsticks in Hogsmeade to discuss the matter. He wasn't at all sure what she had in mind, but consoled himself that she clearly wasn't going to turn him down flat or she would have done so by letter.

A shower, shave and general spruce-up later, and Snape was on his way. Hogsmeade was not far by broom, and although Snape was by no means an expert flier, the short journey to Hogsmeade was well within his capabilities. He entered the Three Broomsticks slightly out of breath, ordered a mineral water and looked for Caitlin.

She was there, sitting on her own in a quiet corner, a glass of wine in front of her. Snape felt his heart skip a beat as he laid eyes on her again. Twelve years since he'd seen her last, and the years had been kind to her. She was still as pretty as she'd ever been.

He took the seat opposite her. "It is good to see you again, Caitlin. You look well." he said, hoping his voice didn't betray his inner feelings.

"No thanks to you." Caitlin said shortly. "I've not forgotten our last meeting, if you have. Experiences like that leave their mark on a woman."

Snape's good mood evaporated in an instant. "And you think it didn't affect me?" he snapped. "I was never the same after that night, never. Believe me, I would have done anything to prevent it if I could. Caitlin, for what's it's worth, I'm sorry."

"Sorry?" Caitlin hissed. "You put me through hell, and that's all you have to say?" She sat back and ran her hands through her hair. Snape tried to ignore the pangs of guilt currently racking his conscience.

"I did save your life, Caitlin." he said softly.

"Yes, I suppose you did." she said bitterly. "I almost wished you'd let me die though. In some ways it would have been preferable." She took a drink from her goblet. "Anyway, it's in the past now. That's not what I'm here to talk about. This ritual. You're serious, then."

"Never more so." Snape said. "I can see no other way. No antidote potion can do any more than provide the space and the strength to give the victim a fighting chance. This is the most effective means of reviving her. I know it's a lot to ask of you, but it's the only way. Caitlin, please." He gave her a pleading look.

Caitlin looked thoughtful. "Deanna's safety is my prime concern here. There will be safeguards, won't there?"

Snape reached out and took Caitlin's hand in his own. "You have my word. I would never do anything to endanger your life or that of Deanna. I will do all in my power to protect her."

Caitlin nodded. "Very well. I believe you. I don't know why I should, all reason screams against it, but I believe you. Does Deanna know yet?"

"Not yet. I wanted your permission first."

"Most thoughtful of you. You must ask her. If she consents, then I will do it."

Snape squeezed her hand and kissed her fingertips. "Caitlin, thank you! I don't deserve this, but thank you!"

Caitlin regarded him coldly. "No. You don't. Let go of me." Snape dropped her hand immediately, his hurt feelings swiftly camouflaged behind a cool exterior. "Let's get one thing clear." Caitlin said, her every word laced with venom. "I'm not doing this out of any obligation or feeling for you. I'm doing this because Mel is my best friend and I don't want her to suffer. As a mother myself, I know what she's going through. And Marlie's a good kid. I'm doing this for their sake not yours. So don't get any ideas about renewing our friendship, because I'm not interested. As far as I am concerned, any regard I once had for you is dead. Do you hear me?"

"I understand you." Snape said quietly, feeling as if a part of him was dying along with Marlene.

"Good." Caitlin said. "This is a purely professional relationship and that's how things are staying." She gave him a stern look. Snape didn't dare respond. All the answers he could think of would have got him slapped for certain. In the end, he opted for the formal response.

"As you wish, Caitlin. As you wish." he murmured. He hadn't really expected any warmth from her, but to hear it spelt out so clearly crushed him. However, at least they were talking again. It was a start. And maybe, just maybe, Caitlin would mellow and forgive him. Caitlin might act tough, but deep down she was soft as lights and Snape knew it. With this in mind, he opted for a change in subject.

"How's Melissa?" he asked suddenly. As he had hoped, Caitlin dropped her coolness. Her features changed from impassive to saddened.

"As well as could be expected. I mean, she's bearing up well, but..." She shook her head. "This is hitting the Lovegoods really hard. It's taking its toll on them. I fear for Mel, I fear for her marriage. Len's spending virtually all his free time down in the workshop. He says he's working on this Walkmage invention for Marlie, but I don't wonder if it's also to avoid facing up to things." Caitlin sighed. "I hope Marlie pulls through, if only for their sake. Mel's always been so strong, but this could break her, it really could."

"She'll make it." Snape said quietly. "Marlene's like her mother in reverse. Soft on the outside, strong on the inside. She'll make it. I'll do all I can to help." He was surprised to find himself meaning every word.

Caitlin burst into tears at this. "That poor kid!" she sobbed. "She's only eleven, she doesn't deserve this! She's got her whole life ahead of her. She doesn't deserve to die. And her whole family, they're being torn apart by this. If she goes down, the whole family falls to bits. All because some ignorant bastard wants to get back at Mel for whatever she did to him or his family way back when." She buried her face in her hands, crying. Snape shifted uneasily. While it was a relief to see some emotion, he hated seeing Caitlin upset, always had done. Moving his chair so he was sitting next to her, he slipped his arm around her. To his surprise, she didn't push him away, but just leant her head against him and allowed herself to be comforted. After a while, she recovered herself.

"I'm sorry." she said, wiping her eyes. "It's just getting to me, you know. All the worry and the stress... She's not even my daughter, and see what it's doing to me."

Snape didn't reply, just offered her his black silk handkerchief. She accepted it gratefully and dabbed her eyes.

"Didn't last long, did it? Keeping things professional, what a joke. Look at me. You can tell I've been on the red wine again." Caitlin laughed ruefully. "You always did know how to get under my skin. You and Mel both."

"The feeling is mutual, my dear." Snape said with a trace of amusement in his voice. "I have routinely done things for you that I would never have considered doing for anyone else."

"Like what?" Caitlin asked lightly.

Snape gazed intensely into her eyes. "I would have left any other witch to her fate that night."

Caitlin's face lost all trace of lightheartedness. Now she looked only fearful.

"I have to go." she said thickly. She broke away from him and got to her feet.

"Caitlin, wait." Snape called after her in desperation and fury at himself. "Don't go."

But she wasn't listening. Backing away from him, she turned and made swiftly for the door. Snape, cursing himself under his breath, ran after her. Reaching the door, he looked for her, but in vain. She'd already Disapparated.

Chapter Fifteen: The Net Draws In

The atmosphere in the Serpent's Nest began to improve dramatically as Christmas approached. Summer Montague, Kat Stormosi and Laetitia Vetinari made good use of Decoration Charms in the common room, while Jordan Foxworth and Mike Lovegood mysteriously managed to acquire a tree from somewhere, although not even Jordan's brother Geoff could get them to admit how. However, Luella couldn't help noticing the Forbidden Forest looked just a little different the next day. Slightly... smaller.

The ground outside was covered in snow, and an informal inter-house snowball championship had grown into being. So far the Gryffindors were winning, although Deanna had managed to regain some popularity by some spectacularly dirty fighting. It had also had the unexpected side-effect of impressing Crabbe, who disliked Gryffindor House even more than most Slytherins.

"He trusts me!" Deanna was able to tell Luella and Rianne with pride. "He keeps saying how impressed he is with me. Not to mention dropping hints on how I could get back at all those who've abandoned me for sticking to my guns. I think, with a little work at it, I can get a confession out of him pretty soon. Is that tape recorder done yet?"

"Pretty much." Rianne said gleefully. "Got an owl from Mr. Lovegood the other day. Practically ready. He says we should have it on Christmas morning, he's going to send it with Mike's presents." Mike Lovegood had already made it generally known that he would be staying at Hogwarts over the holidays. Nothing had been said, but everyone guessed that he couldn't face Christmas at home without his sister.

"So maybe we can do it over the holidays." Luella said thoughtfully. "There won't be so many people around and Crabbe might be in a party mood. He might be more willing to talk." Crabbe and his little gang were also staying over during the holidays. Luella suspected that this was more out of a desire to taunt Mike about his sister than sampling Hogwarts Christmas dinner.

"OK." Deanna said firmly. "That settles it. I'll stay over so we can go for it over the holidays. Hopefully, by January they'll be expelled, I'll be a hero, and I can get my self-respect back."

"I'll join you. You'll need me to help set the thing up." Rianne said decisively.

"And me. I'm not spending Christmas without you." Luella added.

Deanna grinned. "You two are the best, you know that? Come here. Group hug." She grabbed the two of them and they all three hugged each other. Suddenly, although the most risky and dangerous part of their plan was yet to come, Luella felt hopeful.

Finally, term ended. The Slytherin Party was more subdued than normal, with the traditional "absent friends" toast especially poignant this year. However, it was still pretty raucous, and went on well into the night. It was a very tired and drained looking Slytherin House that boarded the Hogwarts Express next morning.

Deanna turned away from the departing carriages with a sigh. The holidays were really upon them, and that meant she now faced the real prospect of having to trap Crabbe soon. However, she consoled herself with the fact that the next time she saw the carriages, Crabbe would be expelled, and it would be down to her. With the vision of all the Slytherins cheering her and a sobbing Mike Lovegood thanking her for avenging his sister and begging forgiveness for ever doubting her on her mind, she headed back for the Slytherin Corridor and almost walked into Professor Snape.

"Oh!" she gasped. "Sorry, sir. Didn't see you. Are you alright?"

"Watch where you are going in future, Miss Tyler. Foresight is an important quality and one you would do well to cultivate. Come with me, I wish to speak with you in my office. Now." Snape had a cold, tight-lipped expression on his face, so Deanna decided it was best not to argue.

Deanna followed him into his office and did a double-take. Sitting behind Snape's desk was none other than Professor Dumbledore himself. Deanna had had very little experience of her Headmaster so far, and suddenly being asked to attend an interview with both him and Professor Snape could only mean one thing. She was in trouble. She glanced around the office. Someone else, a woman, was seated in one of the three chairs.

"Mum!" Deanna gasped. Caitlin smiled thinly. "Hello, dear." she said, a small quiver in her voice betraying fear. However, she did not seem angry. In fact, Caitlin Tyler seemed, if anything, fearful and sad.

Deanna took the seat next to her mother, and was vaguely aware of Snape seating himself on her left. "Mum, what's going on? Are you OK? I'm not in trouble, am I?" Deanna trembled. Her house head, headmaster, and mother in such a formal setting was not a good sign.

Professor Dumbledore seemed to relax at this point, although Snape still maintained an icy cold exterior and Caitlin looked terrified.

"No, Deanna, you are not in trouble. Quite the reverse in fact." His eyes twinkled behind the voluminous beard. "We require your assistance in a most important matter."

"Me? Help you?" Deanna asked, surprised. "Why do you need me?"

"It's your friend, Miss Lovegood. I won't bother with any of the details of her case as you doubtless already know all about that. Indeed, I daresay you know more than I do." He regarded her amusedly. Deanna smiled nervously and shifted in her seat.

What was Professor Dumbledore getting at?

"Well," Dumbledore continued, "Sleeping Death's effects are such that conventional antidotes are not guaranteed to work, and even specially designed ones can do no more than give the victim a chance to fight. So we are considering resorting to a ritual known as Dream Weaver. Have you heard of it?"

"Dream Weaver?" Deanna thought hard. The name sounded familiar. Somewhere in one of her mother's Auror manuals... "Isn't that where someone enters another person's dreams to help them work with them?"

"Well done." Dumbledore sounded impressed. "Your mother has taught you well." Caitlin acknowledged the compliment without a word. Dumbledore continued. "Yes, that is the basic premise of Dream Weaver. A ritual beloved of both healers and Dark Mages the world over. And it is this ritual we are proposing to carry out on Miss Lovegood."

"I see." Deanna said in a small voice. "But what does that have to do with me?" She was uncomfortably aware of the tension in the room. On one side of her, Caitlin was wringing her hands, on the other Snape seemed to have frozen. Dumbledore's humour vanished.

"We were hoping you could enter her dreams for us." Dumbledore said softly.

Deanna felt herself go numb. Her, Deanna Tyler, eleven year old first year Hogwarts witch? Take part in Dream Weaver, one of the more complex and dangerous ritual around?

"You're not serious." she whispered.

"Professor Snape tells me you've already done it once. With the help of Dream Weaver, we were hoping you'd be able to do it more completely and give Miss Lovegood the help she needs to break free." Dumbledore gazed keenly at her.

"But isn't Dream Weaver dangerous?" Deanna said fearfully.

"There are risks involved." Dumbledore said cautiously. "However, there will be safeguards in place so that we can return you to your body at the first sign of trouble. And the ritual is to be performed by two very capable mages who both have your best interests at heart."

"Who...?" Deanna started to ask, then realised. They were sitting either side of her.

"Your mother and I will be conducting it." Snape said stonily, his voice sounding far away, as if his mind was elsewhere entirely. "All appropriate safeguards will be used. The danger will be minimal."

Caitlin squeezed her daughter's shoulder, her eyes shining very brightly. "We'll do all we can to keep you safe, love." she said gently, her voice trembling a little. "I won't

let any harm come to you, I promise."

Deanna's fear abated a little. With her mother watching out for her, she would surely be safe, wouldn't she? And Snape could be relied on to keep calm in a crisis. Plus Dumbledore himself was likely to be around. And it was Marlie's best chance at recovery.

"Alright." she heard herself saying. "I'll do it." Even while another voice shouted Fool! Are you mad?

The three adults all seemed to relax a little. "Thank you, Deanna." Dumbledore said, sounding greatly relieved. "Severus, when is the ritual to take place?"

"The necessary potions will take me a month to prepare, so I believe we can perform it towards the end of January. I recommend Candlemas Eve as the best date." Snape replied.

"Excellent. Well, in that case, I'll leave all three of you to start preparing." Dumbledore left and with that, the meeting dispersed. Snape began busying himself with some potions ingredients, strangely unwilling to approach Caitlin, who led her daughter out into the corridor.

They didn't speak for some time. It was Caitlin who broke the silence.

"Deanna..." she began, "Deanna, are you sure you want to go through with this? Because I won't mind if you want to back out. That is... if you think it's too dangerous, I won't think any the worse of you."

Deanna touched her mother's hand. "Mum, don't worry. I want to do all I can to help Marlie, and if that means going into her dreams, then OK. No I'm not sure about it, of course I'm not, it sounds terrifying. But I still want to do it."

Caitlin hugged her daughter, tears filling her eyes. "Oh, Deanna! I love you, you know that? You're such a wonderful daughter. I just wanted you to know."

Deanna felt faintly embarrassed at this sudden display of emotion. "Mum, please." she said, hoping against hope that no one she knew saw her.

Caitlin dried her eyes and released Deanna. "Sorry, dear. But I just wanted you to know that, just in case..." She left the words unspoken.

"It's OK. I'll be fine. Marlie's mind can't be too bad a place, can it? She's had a very cushy life, it's not like I'm exploring Auntie Mel's mind or anything." Although Deanna didn't know the details of her godmother's past, she guessed that having been an Auror during the Voldemort Years couldn't have been a walk in the park. Unless it was Central Park in the middle of the night, that is.

Caitlin smiled nervously. "Yes... yes, you're right. You'll be fine. Now it must surely be lunchtime soon, why don't you take me to the Great Hall, see if Hogwarts cuisine

is as good as it used to be in my day?"

The days passed swiftly and it was no time at all until Christmas morning dawned in Hogwarts. In the Slytherin girls' first year dorm, Luella was first to wake. For a while, she did nothing, just lay there savouring the early morning quiet. The fact that it was Christmas morning did not immediately occur to her. At least, not until she heard an excited squeal from across the room. Minutes later, her bed hangings were flung open and she found herself greeted by a flushed Rianne, still in her pyjamas.

"Wakey, wakey, rise and shine, Lu! It's Christmas!" she yelled. Luella blinked. Across the foot of her bed was a pile of parcels of various shapes and sizes.

Before she could react, Deanna, bleary-eyed and hair all over the place, poked her head out of her own curtains.

"What on earth is going on out here?" she said sleepily before noticing all the parcels at the foot of her own bed. "Ooh, presents!" she exclaimed, suddenly becoming more energised.

"Wake up, sleepy head!" Rianne called cheerfully, sending a Wind Charm her way and causing Deanna to shriek as the wind whipped her hair into even more of a tangle. She brushed her hair out of her eyes and poked her tongue out at Rianne, who ignored her.

"Come on you two, let's see some liveliness! It's Christmas! How can you be content to sleep? I've been up since five, but refrained from checking out any of my presents out of consideration for you."

"Very kind of you, Ri." Deanna yawned. "What time is it now, ten past?"

Rianne threw a pillow at her. "Idiot. Half seven. Come on. Presents. We'll take it in turns. You first, Lu."

Luella reached for the nearest present. It turned out to be from Mrs. Tyler, who'd sent her a blue velvet winter cloak.

"Nice." Deanna said, eyeing it up. "You'll need it, if what I've heard about Hogwarts winters is true. Obviously Mum doesn't want to see you freeze to death."

Luella's other presents turned out to be a necklace and a copy of Madonna's "Like A Prayer" album from her parents, with which Deanna was most impressed, a copy of Hogwarts: A History from Rianne ("well, I thought you'd be interested in the background seeing as you don't have mage parents to tell you things."), and from Deanna, a dark blue Dicta-Quill, which wrote things for you as you dictated to it. Luella, a left-hander, had had numerous problems learning to deal with quill pens and ink bottles, so Deanna, out of pity and sympathy (despite having learnt to write with quills from an early age, as a left-hander herself, she too still had problems) had

decided to get her a present which would make her life that bit easier.

Deanna was next. From her mother, an aromatherapy kit with essential oils. ("Erm, my mum's a bit of an old hippie." Deanna said, faintly embarrassed, but Luella could tell that she was secretly rather pleased with it.) From Rianne, a magical hairdryer, herbal shampoo and conditioner, and styling tongs. Deanna's biggest irritation was her hair which flatly refused to do anything other than hang there loosely and get greasy annoyingly quickly. Half her life and pocket money had been spent on things that would make it look good but it was still a battle. From Luella's parents, a Selection Box of Chocolates. ("Muggle, but very nice!" Deanna said with approval.) From Mrs. Lovegood, a book entitled *Dark Mages Through The Ages* all about how various dark wizards and witches got their come-uppance, which Deanna was most enthusiastic about, and from Luella, a guitar maintenance kit complete with tuition book and tape. Deanna's prized possession was her acoustic guitar, and her energies were going into learning how to play it. Luella thought Deanna was rather good, although she was surprisingly shy about anyone hearing her play.

Then it was Rianne's turn. Compared to theirs, Rianne's present pile was huge. It seemed she had rather a lot of relations, all of whom seemed to be Italian fashion designers judging from the amount of designer robes she appeared to have. However, she eventually exhausted her present pile. There was now only one present left to unwrap.

"Well, Ri?" Deanna asked. "You going to open it?"

"Who's it from?" Luella asked.

"Mr. Lovegood." Rianne said quietly. There was a letter attached and she read it out loud to them first.

Dear Rianne,

Well, here it is. The finished product, that you've been waiting for so long to get your hands on. The Walkmage. I've no idea how it will function in Hogwarts, but I've tested it in a contained magical field here and it seems to work. It's powered by quartz crystal batteries which absorb magical energy from the environment. There should be no problems at Hogwarts; the same magic that wreaks havoc with conventional technology will be more than adequate to powering this. All you need to do is leave it for 24 hours to charge up then it should be ready. It really is a wonderful invention, I'm very impressed with Marlie. I just hope that it can wake her up, we all really miss her here. I've enclosed some of her favourite tapes so you can play them to her, and some blank ones so you can record onto it as requested.

Anyway, good luck with it. Hope it goes well for you all and it works out. Hopefully we'll be seeing you in the summer as usual.

Merry Christmas,

Leonard Lovegood.

Rianne laid down the letter. "Wow." she whispered. "It's here. And it actually works!"

"So let's have a look at it then!" Deanna said impatiently. Rianne tore off the wrapping paper. It was packed inside a cardboard box along with lots of bubble wrap which Deanna immediately pounced on and started popping, and some tapes by Madonna, the Bangles, Bananarama, and a band by the name of Incubus Succubus who Rianne claimed were an up and coming mage rock band and were really rather good.

Rianne brushed them to one side and reached for the Walkmage itself. Peeling the bubble wrap away, she held it out for inspection. Luella and Deanna gasped. It looked little different from an ordinary Walkman, but it was clear that it had been taken apart and welded together again. There were headphones, speakers, and a microphone with it, which seemed to have had the wires removed and replaced with some magical substance unknown to Luella.

"Unicorn hair wrapped in basilisk skin and protected with Indestructible Charms." Deanna breathed. "Nice! Kind of like mini-wands. Capable of channelling magical energy. When can we use it?"

"Tomorrow, it says here." Rianne said, indicating the letter. Luella looked at for herself. The date at the top caught her eye. 20th December 1989. Which meant...

"Ri, the letter was sent days ago! It's probably been at Hogwarts since the 22nd at least! Which means..." she paused, letting them work it out.

"It's fully charged and we can use it now!" Deanna exclaimed. "Excellent! Let's try it out."

The first thing to get played was Luella's new Madonna album. Rianne was most impressed by it. "Well, if this is Muggle music, I like it! Madonna is ace."

"Too right she is." Deanna lay back, tapping her feet to Express Yourself. "Tell you what, we should go to see her some time. All four of us. I think it'd be fun. Going to a Muggle gig."

"It'd be an experience." Luella smiled. "I'd love to! And I bet Marlie would be up for it."

"That settles it then. She's got to wake up for that. Who wouldn't want to miss Madonna live?" Deanna said, as if it were decided.

Rianne however seemed preoccupied. "All very well going on about what we're going to do when Marlie's better. But we need to remember why we got this thing in the first place. We need to fix it up to you, Deanna, and see if it records properly when concealed. Come on, let's try it with a blank tape."

Much testing and arrangements of Walkmage, microphone and Spellotape later, and Deanna was finally wired up to it. Mr. Lovegood had thoughtfully added a remote

control feature, so it could be controlled by tapping one's wand. This made it much easier for Deanna to turn on and off when necessary.

Luella stood back, surveying their handiwork. "Well, you're as ready as you'll ever be. Down to you now, 007. Reckon you can get him to confess soon?"

"No probs. Crabbe's been hinting about some triumph of his for ages now. I think he's ready to tell me." Deanna's usual cockiness was back. "Come on. I'm hungry. It must be nearly time for dinner."

The rest of the day passed less happily. They spent most of the day in the common room. Luella and Rianne passed the time playing Exploding Snap, while Deanna sat apart from them, reading the book Mrs. Lovegood had sent her. She had eaten her meals with Crabbe, listening to him, Goyle, and Clarissa making pointed comments about Mike and why he wasn't at home this year. Deanna forced herself to smile and join in, although privately her heart bled for him.

The three older Slytherins approached her that evening as she was reading.

"What's that you got there, Tyler?" Crabbe asked her.

"Book from Melissa Lovegood. She's my godmother. Has hopes of me becoming an Auror like her. Fat chance." She snorted. "I mean, I might just to learn all the cool magic they know, but fancy having all that power and not getting to use it."

"A woman after my own heart." Clarissa laughed softly. "Power's no good unless you use it, isn't it Dexter?" The three of them laughed harshly. Deanna forced a grin.

"Melissa Lovegood's a weakling and a fool. Much like her daughter." Crabbe was grinning. Deanna surreptitiously tapped her wand against her chair. The tape recorder began whirring. No one else seemed to notice.

"So, I suppose you're pretty happy Marlene's out for the count then. I must say, it was pretty silly of her to get herself poisoned like that. Didn't check her food and drink carefully enough. Silly cow." Deanna dismissed Marlie with a wave of her hand.

Crabbe leaned a little closer to her. "You wouldn't have let that happen to you, would you?"

"Course not." Deanna replied contemptuously, her pulse racing. "As if I'd be so naive. She's too trusting. Too... nice. You can't afford to be nice in this world. You've got to be smart. Cunning. Devious. Live by your wits, look out for number one. Trust no one."

The others were giving each other appreciative glances. "Do you really believe that?" Crabbe asked her. Deanna nodded. He leaned closer.

"What if we were to show you a way of protecting yourself? Making your way that

bit easier?" He seemed almost hungry.

"Easier how?" Deanna purred softly.

He drew even closer to her. Deanna fought the urge to back away. Goyle and Clarissa moved around to block out the rest of the common room.

"There's all sorts of power in this world. There's the stuff they teach here. And then there's... other things. We're learning the other things. And we'd be willing to teach them to you." There was a ravenous gleam in his eyes. Deanna felt a rush of adrenaline. She lowered her voice.

"Do you mean Dark Arts?" she whispered, trying to sound impressed.

"We prefer to call it Hidden Magic. The magic they don't want you to know about. And why don't they want you to know about it? Because if you did, you'd be truly powerful. There'd be no one who could stop you. And certain people in authority find that threatening. You know why?" Deanna shook her head.

"Because they're weak. They feel threatened by strength. They fear it might destroy them, as well it might. But why should we strong ones let concern for them stand in our way of realising our potential? If you let others control your destiny, look where you end up. In a hospital bed in a coma, like that fool Lovegood. Power, Deanna. That's all that really matters."

"What could I do with this power?" Deanna asked, seemingly enthralled.

"Anything you like." Crabbe grinned mysteriously. "Bring those in authority round to your way of thinking. Make whoever you want fall in love with you. Get rid of any enemy. All yours, if you really want it."

"I could send that self-righteous snob Rianne Stormosi and my erstwhile Mudblood friend the same way as Lovegood." Deanna mused.

"Very good." Crabbe grinned. "I could show you how. It's not so hard. Sleeping Death is an amazing tool if you want to frighten others. Or remove someone from your path if they happen to have something you want."

"Like a place on the Quidditch first team?" Deanna grinned.

"You learn fast, Tyler." Crabbe said appreciatively. "I got rid of Lovegood for you. I could teach you how to have the other two at your mercy."

Deanna felt her eyes widen. She had him! Crabbe patted her cheek. "I knew you'd see things our way. Come and join us. We'll teach you a few basic things." With that, he led her away to a quiet corner, where the rest of the evening was spent teaching Deanna a few more dangerous hexes.

Deanna finally excused herself around half past ten, claiming tiredness. She sneaked back to her dorm, and locked the door behind her. Luella and Rianne were waiting as Deanna extricated the Walkmage.

"Well?" Luella asked, trembling in anticipation. "Did you get anything?"

Deanna beamed. "He walked right into it. We, my dears, have got him. Right where we want him." She played the tape to them. They listened open-mouthed as Crabbe's voice was heard saying "You learn fast, Tyler. I got rid of Lovegood for you. I could teach you how to have the other two at your mercy."

"Deanna, that's brilliant." Rianne said softly.

"He confessed!" Luella said in a daze. "He actually confessed! We've really and truly got him!"

"We really and truly have!" Deanna grinned. All three of them hugged each other.

"We just need to get that tape to Professor Snape in the morning now." Rianne said. "Lu and me had better do that, we don't want to blow your cover just yet."

"I'll look after the tape if you like." Luella volunteered. And with that, the tape was stored in Luella's bedside cabinet.

Immediately on waking, Luella and Rianne grabbed the tape and Walkmage, got dressed and raced to Snape's office. Snape, still in his nightclothes and unshaven, was less than pleased to see them.

"What exactly is so important that you feel the need to wake me up at this untimely hour in the morning?" he said irritably. "What time is it anyway?"

"Eight o'clock." Rianne said promptly. "But that's not important. Sir, we've got something for you!"

"Your Christmas spirit touches my soul." Snape said dryly. "However, you appear to have overlooked the fact that Christmas was yesterday."

Rianne shook her head. "Not a Christmas present. Sir, we've done it. We've got proof who poisoned Marlie."

This seemed to wake Snape up. "Indeed?" He raised an eyebrow. "You had better come in. Take a seat while I get dressed in the other room."

Luella and Rianne sat down in his office while Snape moved away into his private apartments. Ten minutes later he returned, fully dressed, shaved and looking rather more alert.

"So." he said. "What have you got for me?"

Luella produced the Walkmage from her bag. "This." she said, attaching the speakers and inserting the tape. Snape looked at it in bewilderment and scepticism.

"And this is meant to be what exactly?"

"It's a Walkmage." Luella explained patiently, rather pleased at knowing something that Snape didn't. "It's a Muggle invention adapted for use at Hogwarts. Marlie designed it, her dad built it. You can use it to record sound and play it back later. Music. Background noise. Conversations."

Rianne took up the thread. "We used it to get a taped confession out of Crabbe. Or rather, Deanna did. She's an excellent spy, very convincing. Anyway, listen to this." She played the tape. Snape listened intently.

After it had finished, Snape sat back in amazement. "Well, well, well. I am very impressed. I knew you were planning something, but I would never have guessed... Whose idea was all this?"

"Deanna's." Luella and Rianne chorused. Snape chuckled to himself.

"Should have known. So that's what she was up to. Her mother will be pleased. Not to mention her godmother. She'll make an excellent Auror one of these days. Twenty points each for all three of you for showing initiative." Snape said, with more than a hint of pride. He then returned to his usual brusque manner. "I need to speak with Professor Dumbledore about this. I'll need to borrow this...?"

"Walkmage." Rianne said. "Take it. Just as long as we get it back afterwards."

"Of course. Very well, I will speak with Professor Dumbledore after breakfast. Then if all goes well, arrange an interview with Crabbe and his friends this afternoon. I will have to expel them of course. With any luck, they will be on the Hogwarts Express by this evening and Miss Tyler can resume a normal life again. Now, I believe they will be serving breakfast soon, so why don't you two leave this with me? I shall see you both soon, no doubt." He ushered them out. Luella and Rianne left with a spring in their step.

"We did it!" Luella whispered with joy as they emerged into the Slytherin Corridor. "We really did it! We caught them, and they're expelled!"

Rianne hugged her. "Lu, we're wonderful, aren't we? Professor Snape thought so too, didn't he? Look how impressed he was with the Walkmage! And sixty points for Slytherin! I'm so happy!"

Luella raised an eyebrow. "Easily pleased, aren't you? Ri, for someone who claims not to have a crush on Snape, you're not doing a very convincing job."

Rianne flushed with embarrassment. "I do not have a crush on Professor Snape! I

respect him as my House Master and a very skilled Potions teacher, and that is all!"

"Of course it is, Ri." Luella said teasingly. "And you were respecting him like mad when you got a chance to see him in his nightwear, weren't you?"

"Luella!" Rianne gasped in shock. "As if I'd do anything of the sort! Although he did look so much different when he'd just been woken up. More... innocent. And vulnerable. Like he hadn't had time to put on that irascible old curmudgeon front he usually wears."

Luella shook her head in amused disbelief. "Whatever you say, Ri. Whatever you say. What's it worth for me not to tell Deanna you said that?"

"Luella Martin, if you breathe one word of that to anyone, I'll..." Rianne threatened.

Luella grinned. "Make me." And with that, she was off, with a furious Rianne chasing after her, threatening all sorts of dire punishments if Luella so much as opened her mouth in future.

Snape was as good as his word. Later that day, he came into the common room, called Crabbe, Goyle, and Clarissa out and left. An hour later, the three of them returned. They did not look happy. Crabbe marched straight over to Deanna.

"You little bitch!" he snarled at her. "We took you into our confidence and you betrayed us! You'll pay for this, Tyler. I swear it, you'll pay."

Deanna appeared unruffled. "I kept telling you, trust no one. You would have done well to take that advice, Dexter."

"We're expelled, thanks to you!" Clarissa cried. "Glittering careers ahead of us, and now it's all in ruins."

"Yeah, our parents are going to kill us." Goyle grunted. "We're not happy, Tyler."

"Not happy at all." Crabbe said softly. "And do you know what we do to people we're not happy with?"

Deanna never did find out what this was, as the conversation was cut short by the common room door opening. Professor Snape stepped in nonchalantly, wand in hand.

"I believe I told the three of you to pack your things and leave?" he said idly. "Your carriage will be here soon, I don't want it kept waiting. Leave Miss Tyler alone."

Crabbe, Goyle and Clarissa didn't dare reply. They went to their separate dorms, casting dark looks at Deanna. Snape watched them leave without a word. Mike Lovegood broke the silence.

"Sir?" he began.

"Yes, Lovegood?" Snape asked, not unkindly.

"Sir, where are they going?"

"Home."

"Why?" Mike asked, bewildered.

"They're expelled. Brewing Sleeping Death without a permit is illegal after all. They are lucky they're not in Azkaban. Although that may change when I notify your mother."

"Sleeping Death? You mean...?" Mike's jaw dropped in amazement.

"That's right. They poisoned your sister. Apparently, Crabbe was jealous that she stole the place on the Quidditch team that he'd thought would be his. Obvious really, but very difficult to prove." Snape seemed to be enjoying himself.

"How? How did you find out?" Mike whispered, still in shock.

"Well, it was really thanks to Misses Martin, Stormosi and Tyler here. Your sister is fortunate indeed in her choice of friends. You will have to get the details off them. Which reminds me. Miss Martin, your Walkmage." He handed the tape recorder to Luella. Crabbe, Goyle and Clarissa re-emerged with their trunks. Snape wasted no time in ushering them out. As he followed them, he gave the three girls a half-smile of congratulatory pride.

Mike gazed at them in awe. "It was you three who found out? But how? And why have you got a Walkman, you know they don't work here."

"A Walkmage, Lovegood." Deanna corrected, a triumphant gleam in her eyes. "Specially adapted for Hogwarts use. Designed by your sister, built by your dad. We put it into use and recorded Crabbe confessing everything. I spent weeks ingratiating myself with his little gang so he'd trust me enough to brag about it. My finest hour." Deanna was bursting with pride.

Mike was stunned. "You mean you weren't really friends with them at all?" Deanna shook her head. "You were just pretending?" Deanna nodded, her grin widening. "You were spying on them?" Deanna nodded again, looking as if she was about to burst.

"You really went to all that trouble just to get them punished? All for Marlie's sake?" He looked unable to comprehend it. He gazed at Deanna, an unfathomable look in his eyes.

"I think I owe you an apology." he said softly. "Deanna Tyler, I take back everything I ever said about you. For sheer deviousness, if nothing else, you are a more than worthy Slytherin. I'm really sorry I shouted at you like that. Can you ever forgive

me?"

Deanna grinned. "Go on then. Wasn't really your fault, I was a real bitch. Can't say I blame you. I've have done the same, you know. Shake on it?"

Mike grinned and they shook hands. And with that, the pall of gloom that had been over the Serpent's Nest for so long lifted a little.

The start of term led to a similar reconciliation with the Slytherin boys, all of whom professed awe for Deanna and sorrow that they'd ever doubted her. Lucas Vetinari apologised profusely to her for ostracising her, and made it up to her by shouting her triumph to the entire common room, while Chris Bryant seemed very impressed with the Walkmage, especially now he was able to give that Def Leppard demonstration he'd failed at before. It didn't impress everyone, but it did lead to a great many Slytherins owling home to get their own music collections sent to Hogwarts, and quite a few requests to have their own made up. It also led to a great many fights over what music to listen to, and many threats by Debra Stormosi and Professor Snape to confiscate it, which luckily were not carried out. All in all, life in the Serpent's Nest began to resemble nothing more than one continuous party. However, although Marlie had been avenged, as Rianne pointed out, she was still firmly asleep.

"We may have caught Crabbe, but Marlie's not better yet." Rianne said pragmatically. "She's still in the hospital wing, and she's no closer to waking. And I have no idea how we're going to accomplish that. All very well everyone here celebrating, but it'll be a bittersweet victory indeed if Marlie goes and dies on us."

Deanna felt a chill go up her spine. She remembered her promise to Dumbledore about entering Marlie's dreams. The other side of Christmas and with the capture of Crabbe to occupy her mind, she'd had little time to think about what she'd committed to. Now, however, she couldn't stop. Candlemas Eve, February 1st, was only a few weeks away and seemed to be advancing ever closer with disturbing speed. How on earth was getting into Marlie's dreams going to help her? What if there was nothing she could do? What if it all went horribly wrong? The possibilities for one or both of them dying seemed endless. Perhaps worst of all, she'd need to put her trust in Professor Snape, who she still didn't entirely feel comfortable around. However, there was nothing she could do now. For better or for worse, Dream Weaver awaited.

Chapter Sixteen: Dream Weaver

It was three weeks into the new term when Deanna got the news she had been dreading. On the morning of Candlemas Eve, at the end of Defence Against the Dark Arts, their first lesson, Snape entered, causing Professor Quirrell to leap about a foot into the air and tremble in terror.

"I need to have a quick word with Miss Tyler, Samael." he said casually to Quirrell who desperately tried to smile.

"O-of course, S-s-s-Severus. Miss T-tyler?"

Deanna approached them as the rest of the class filed out, her insides numb with fear. Quirrell hung around nervously, waiting for Snape to say what he needed to.

"Alone." Snape snapped at him, giving him a look of death. Quirrell squeaked and ran out with unseemly haste.

"Sir?" she asked nervously, hoping he wasn't going to say what she thought he was.

Snape was regarding her with a strange, unfathomable look. His voice sounded distant.

"Miss Tyler, you recall our conversation before Christmas?" Deanna couldn't be certain, but Snape seemed to be avoiding her eyes.

"Yes sir." she said quietly.

"The preparations are complete. The ritual is ready. Your mother will be arriving this evening to perform it. Are you still willing to participate?"

There was no doubt about it. He was definitely avoiding her eyes.

"I'm willing." she said shortly.

"Good, good." There was a pause. Snape fidgeted slightly. Neither knew quite what to say to each other. Snape broke the silence.

"The ritual will take place at eight o'clock tonight. Be in my office at half past seven. Your mother and I will be waiting for you. You may go now." With that he dismissed her brusquely. Feeling strangely hurt by his coldness, Deanna left.

The next few hours passed in a blur. Rianne talked quite normally, unaware of Deanna's fears. Luella however did notice that Deanna was far from her usual talkative self.

"You alright, Dee?" Luella asked with concern. "You've hardly touched that chocolate cake."

"I'm fine. Not hungry." Deanna forced a smile. Well, that much was true at least. She felt too queasy to possibly eat anything.

"Well give it here, then." Rianne said, oblivious to Deanna's discomfort. "No sense letting good food go to waste." Deanna let her take her dessert away and start scoffing it.

Luella was not so easily fooled. "Not like you to let chocolate cake go begging. Are you sure you're OK? You've been acting weird ever since term started, like you're worried about something. What's up?"

Deanna deliberated over what to say. On the one hand, she was desperate to confide in Luella. On the other, she didn't want her worrying as well.

"I'm fine. Really. Don't worry." Deanna smiled. Luella did not look convinced but chose not to pursue the subject any further.

However, when Deanna left the common room later, saying she was going to ask Snape for help with her Potions homework, Luella, her suspicions already aroused, followed her out and cornered her.

"Alright, Deanna. Out with it. Where are you really going?"

"I told you. I'm going to ask Snape about our Potions assignment." Deanna said roughly.

"Yeah, right. And Marlie's a thrash metal fan. Since when have you ever actually asked anyone for help? And Snape of all people! If you're going to lie, make it plausible." Luella's sharp tongue hid genuine concern and hurt that Deanna wasn't confiding in her.

Deanna shifted uncomfortably. Luella was giving her the same reproachful look her mother always gave her when she wasn't being 100% honest. Her conscience eventually won out, and she told her.

"Alright. I've managed to let myself get talked into taking part in this ritual to try and wake Marlie up. And that's where I'm going. Snape and Mum are conducting it."

Luella gasped in astonishment. "What sort of ritual? Is it dangerous? And why didn't you tell me earlier?" She wore an expression of concern mingled with irritation.

Deanna shuffled her feet and looked at the ground. "Didn't want you to worry." she muttered.

"Worry? Deanna, what exactly are they getting you to do?" Luella now looked terrified.

"They're getting me to enter her dreams and try and help her somehow. Snape reckons it's the only way."

Luella slipped her arm round her friend's shoulder in silence. Deanna, free of the need for secrecy now, felt all the pent-up fear of the last few weeks spill over.

"I don't want to do it, Lu." she whispered, shaking. "I'm scared. So many possibilities of things going wrong... You should have seen Mum when they asked me, she looked so frightened. Afterwards, she actually told me what a wonderful daughter I was and how much she loved me, just in case something happened. She almost never does that when she's sober, she hates all that mushy stuff as much as I do. I'm so scared I'll get trapped in there and end up as some kind of vegetable, or Marlie dies with me still in there. So afraid..."

"Hey. It'll be OK, Dee." Luella said gently. "It'll be fine. Snape and Mrs. Tyler, they know their stuff. You'll be fine."

"Easy for you to say!" Deanna snapped. "You don't have to do it! I'm the one taking the risk here! I don't think I can go through with it, Lu, I really don't!" She held her head in her hands, close to tears. Luella shook her firmly.

"Listen to me, Deanna. Come on, look at me." Deanna obediently raised her head and looked into Luella's eyes. Luella continued firmly.

"Listen to me, Deanna Tyler. You can do it and you will. You're brave. You care about Marlie and you're willing to take the risk. You will conquer your fear and you'll go through with it. And you'll succeed. Because you have power. Snape and Mrs. Tyler wouldn't be asking you if they didn't think you could do it. You will do it, Deanna. You hear me?"

Deanna seemed to have gone into some kind of trance, for she just stared fixedly at Luella for a bit. Luella began to worry. Was Deanna alright? However, her fears were allayed when Deanna shook herself and seemed to snap out of it.

"Did you say something, Lu?" Deanna asked, sounding much like her old self and not afraid at all.

"I was telling you not to be afraid about the ritual, you'll be perfectly safe. Deanna, are you OK? You looked like you were in some kind of trance there."

"Yeah, I'm fine." Deanna said dismissively. Then she realised. She really did feel fine. No trace of fear at all. Instead this feeling of utter calm and confidence. "I'm fine." she said with wonder. She gazed at Luella in amazement. "Lu, what did you do there? I just looked in your eyes and then everything went hazy. You were saying something, then it seemed to stop and it was OK again. And now I feel fine. Brilliant, in fact. What did you do?" Deanna looked at her in awe.

"Nothing!" Luella said, panicky. "I just looked in your eyes and told you you could do it! That's all, I promise!"

Deanna raised an eyebrow. "Well, I believe you, although many wouldn't. You're obviously more powerful than you realise. Enemies of the Heir, beware!"

It was now Luella's turn to feel uncomfortable. The idea of having strange and unnatural Heir of Slytherin powers was not a particularly welcome one. "Come on," she said testily. "Let's get you to that ritual." And with that, she steered Deanna to Snape's office.

Snape and Mrs. Tyler were waiting for them when they arrived. Mrs. Tyler was perched on Snape's desk, holding herself. She looked terrified. Snape was pacing up and down grimly. They both looked up and started to see Luella there too.

"Miss Martin, what are you doing here?" Snape asked sternly. "Your presence is not required at this time."

"I know what's going on, sir." Luella said bravely. "And I'm not leaving Deanna. I want to watch." She stared Snape out.

Snape opened his mouth to answer, but was interrupted by Mrs. Tyler. "If she wants to watch, Severus, then let her. Hera knows I could do with the support." Mrs. Tyler looked more miserable than Luella had ever seen her. A chill went up Luella's spine. How dangerous was this ritual? Deanna's mother looked as if she were leading her only child to certain death.

"Very well." Snape said irritably. "Follow me." He led the way through the castle until they reached the hospital wing. A private room had been set aside for them, and in they went.

Dumbledore and Madam Pomfrey were waiting for them. Two beds had been set up and on one, Marlie was lying, dressed in her Hogwarts uniform. The room was torchlit, and in two censers, one on each side, incense was filling the room with a sickly aroma. Luella coughed, already feeling lightheaded.

"Well, Caitlin? Severus?" Dumbledore said gently.

"We are ready, Professor." Snape said curtly.

"Luella wanted to watch, sir." Mrs. Tyler said softly.

"Very well. Poppy, would you like to look after Luella for us?" Dumbledore said. Madam Pomfrey nodded and led Luella to one side. Dumbledore turned back to Snape and Mrs. Tyler. "We don't have much time. Her condition has taken a turn for the worse. She might not last the night, and your antidote can only delay the end. We need to hurry." Luella felt her blood run cold. Marlie's life was truly in the balance now.

Mrs. Tyler led Deanna forward, and motioned for her to get onto the other bed. Deanna lay down, looking fearfully at her mother.

"It will be alright, Deanna. I won't let any harm come to you." Mrs. Tyler whispered. Deanna nodded mutely. Madam Pomfrey stepped forward. She had a box full of

glowing gems in her hands. "These are special crystals that will attach themselves to your skin and monitor your health. If there's any changes, we can retrieve you." Deanna did not move as Madam Pomfrey pressed the crystals into her skin, before stepping back and allowed Snape to take over.

Snape stepped forward, producing a vial of potion. He handed it to Mrs. Tyler, who unstopped it and brought it to Deanna's lips. Deanna drank it and lay back on the pillow, closing her eyes. It was not long before the potion took effect and Deanna was fast asleep. Snape then produced another potion, which he administered a few drops of to Marlie. He stepped back and allowed Mrs. Tyler to begin.

She began to walk clockwise around the room, wand held high. The tip glowed softly as she walked.

"Great spirits of the Otherworld, hearken to me now. O ye Gods and Goddesses of all the Earth, listen now to your servant Caitlin Rebecca Tyler. I call on you now, come, fulfil my purpose."

"Lady Hera, Queen of Heaven, I call on you, give my daughter Deanna Melissa Tyler strength, give her power, give her the authority to overcome all obstacles in her path. I am Caitlin Rebecca Tyler, I will not be denied."

"Lady Persephone, Queen of the Underworld, you who also returns from the dead this night, I call on you now, open the gates for my daughter Deanna Melissa Tyler, admit her to your realm, allow her safe passage through your domain, keep back the demons and malevolent spirits that haunt your passageways, allow both Deanna Melissa Tyler and Marlene Jessamyn Lovegood to walk the Halls of Erebus and return unscathed, as you too must do each year. I am Caitlin Rebecca Tyler, I will not be denied."

"Lord Hermes, Lord of the Boundary, I call on you now, you to whom no place is forbidden, to whom no place is denied, who can walk in every realm, both that above, that below and in the world of mortals, grant my daughter Deanna Melissa Tyler the power to walk also in all realms, to pass without harm or danger into the soul of Marlene Jessamyn Lovegood, to transgress the boundary as easily as you yourself can, and guide her steps while there. I am Caitlin Rebecca Tyler, I will not be denied."

"Lord Morpheus, Lord of Dreams, I call on you now, allow my daughter Deanna Melissa Tyler to enter the Dreamworld and pass without resistance into the mind, heart and soul of Marlene Jessamyn Lovegood and walk with her in her dreams. I am Caitlin Rebecca Tyler, I will not be denied!"

Mrs. Tyler paused. In the torchlight, with her robes flowing around her, she looked truly awesome. Her eyes flashed and her wand blazed with light. She motioned to Snape, who stepped forward. Moving over to a small table at the foot of the beds, he took up a small, sharp scalpel and held Deanna's right hand. Luella stifled a scream. Madam Pomfrey squeezed her shoulder and whispered "Don't worry. She'll be fine."

Snape smoothed Deanna's hand out, and without flinching, carved a rune into her palm with a few deft strokes. He let her hand go and took Marlie's hand, carving an identical rune into hers.

"Dagaz, the rune representing the bridge between worlds." Madam Pomfrey whispered quietly. Snape took both girls' bleeding hands and pressed them together, before binding them at the wrist. He stepped back and nodded to Mrs. Tyler, who stepped forward, wand held aloft.

"Blood meets blood and their bodies are joined." she intoned. She waved her wand over them. "Essence mingles with essence and their auras are joined." Now she brought her wand down to touch their hands, struggling to control it as it crackled with power. "By the power of the Most High Gods vested in me, the authority of Lady Hera to command all before me, the permission of Lady Persephone to enter the Misty Realms, the power of Lord Hermes to open all gateways and the power of Lord Morpheus to control dreams, I break down the boundary between Deanna Melissa Tyler and Marlene Jessamyn Lovegood. I lower the gate, I open the door, I allow them to join. Two become one, one enters the other, they are one heart, one mind, one soul, one dreamer! *Via! Unificatio! Syntegra!*"

The light from Mrs. Tyler's wand flared to unbearable brightness. Deanna gasped in her sleep, went rigid then limp suddenly. Marlie let out a piercing yell, arched her back, then fell back to sleep. However, her breathing was different than before. Luella realised that Deanna and Marlie were now breathing in sympathy with each other.

Mrs. Tyler was standing back, completely drained, all power gone from her now. She looked like she was about to faint. Snape got to his feet and went over to her. He was now wearing an expression of what seemed almost like tenderness. "It's alright, Caitlin, love. It will be alright." he said to her softly. "Sit down, rest. You've done more than enough now." Mrs. Tyler didn't respond, merely allowed Snape to guide her to a chair he conjured up for her and help her sit down. She held her head in her hands, clearly exhausted. Snape knelt next to her, patting her arm gently. Luella stared in astonishment. She'd never imagined that Professor Snape could be so, well, affectionate. He seemed more worried about Mrs. Tyler than he did about the two girls.

"Is it done?" Dumbledore asked. Mrs. Tyler nodded mutely.

"It's done, they're joined." Snape said distantly, still regarding Mrs. Tyler with concern. "It just remains to monitor them. Ensure we can retrieve Deanna if anything goes wrong."

Dumbledore nodded. "Then all we can do now is wait. I suggest you all take a seat, I have no idea how long this could take." With a wave of his wand, he conjured chairs for them all. Luella sat down next to Mrs. Tyler and watched them fearfully. For better or worse, it was done. Deanna was in Marlie's dreams. All down to her now. She sat back in her seat and they began their vigil.

Deanna walked swiftly along the passageway that was opening up before her. She wasn't entirely sure where she was, but she guessed that this was either inside Marlie or leading to her. A light was visible up ahead and Deanna headed towards it.

She was about to enter, when someone stepped in front of her. Deanna recoiled in shock. It was Marlie.

"Halt, stranger." Marlie said sternly. Although dressed in Hogwarts uniform, Marlie showed no sign of recognition and simply oozed power. Deanna felt fear go through her. Would she let her in at all?

"Marlie, it's me, Deanna. I'm here to help you. Please, let me past." Deanna begged.

Marlie was unmoved. "What is your name?"

"Deanna Tyler. Look, let me through, it's really important." Deanna was fast losing patience.

"What is your quest?" Marlie said, ignoring her.

"To help you wake up and come home." Deanna snapped. "Let me in, why don't you?"

"What is your favourite colour?" Marlie asked. Completely non-plussed now, Deanna gave in. If Marlie was going to be weird, the only thing to do was out-weird her.

"Burnt sienna with a hint of terracotta." Deanna snapped. "Bloody hell, Marlie, you'll be wanting me to build you a shrubbery next."

"All wrong!" Marlie laughed triumphantly. "Sorry, dear. Can't let you in, I'm afraid."

Deanna threw up her hands in despair. This didn't look good. Wasn't Dream Weaver meant to guarantee entry if performed right? She began to have grave doubts about her mother's abilities. Until she felt something inside her head telling her to relax, open her mind and simply let the words flow. She did so and was amazed to hear the words coming from her mouth.

"I am Deanna Melissa Tyler and my quest is to enter the dreams of Marlene Jessamyn Lovegood and guide her back to the realm of mortals. In the names of Lady Hera, Lady Persephone, Lord Hermes and Lord Morpheus, and the power and virtues they possess, I command you to open the gate and let me through! I am Deanna Melissa Tyler, I will not be denied!" Deanna stood trembling. Where had that come from? That was the language of high ritual, not an eleven year old. But if it worked...

Marlie was no longer laughing. The look on her face was serious now. "Very well." she said quietly. "Very well, you may enter. You are the Guide, I will not obstruct you. I wish you well in your quest." With that, she stepped aside, and allowed Deanna to pass. Deanna nodded respectfully to her and ran past, not sorry to get away.

Marlie muttered with annoyance. Such a weird dream she'd been having, all about Hogwarts, and her family, and some weird demon called Morticia. She wasn't sorry to

be waking up. She opened her eyes. Someone was poking and prodding her awake, and it turned out to be Rianne.

"Wake up, lazy!" she snapped. "Have you forgotten what day it is?"

"What day is it?" Marlie yawned.

"Saturday. And you know what that means?"

"A lie-in?" Marlie asked hopefully.

"No." Rianne snapped. "Quidditch. You're due on the pitch soon. Can't play without a Seeker, can we?"

Marlie got up cursing and grabbed her broom. If it was somewhat unusual to change from pyjamas to Quidditch robes in a second, and highly unorthodox to leave her dorm and find herself right on the pitch, Marlie did not notice. All she was thinking about was beating Gryffindor.

She was just in time for the pre-match handshakes. As she shook hands with each Gryffindor, she was shocked to notice that their usual Beaters had been sidelined in favour of the Weasley twins.

"Hello, Marlie." Fred was grinning.

"How did you two get on the team?" Marlie snapped.

"You're not the only one who's a Quidditch prodigy, you know. The whole team's just had a shake-up. We're Beaters. And this is our new Seeker." George indicated their Seeker.

Marlie turned to see the Gryffindor Number Seven. It was none other than Morticia.

It all came back to her in a flash. Where she was and what she needed to do. And she was suddenly aware of something else too. If Gryffindor won this game, it was all over. Morticia grinned at her sadistically. As they shook hands, Morticia leaned forward and whispered, "Not so strong now, are you, sister? We'll see who has the power now! The Snitch will be mine, and with it, the rightful power here!" She moved on, grinning evilly. Marlie felt her stomach twist itself in knots. Luella and Rianne had been right, with Morticia back, she was weakening again. And if Morticia got to the Snitch first, she was dead. It was really that simple.

Madam Hooch blew the whistle, and the teams took off. It was perfect Quidditch weather, a light breeze and plenty of sun. Easy enough spotting the Snitch in this, Marlene thought. The game went on around her, but Marlie ignored it. All she was concerned about was winning. And that meant keeping her eyes peeled for anything remotely Snitchy.

Deanna cried out in pain as the tunnel she was walking down contracted tight around her. She felt herself grabbed tightly and pushed forward. Wincing with pain as it pushed her on, she closed her eyes and held herself tightly. So this is what being born's like, she thought to herself. Then, with one final push, she was thrust forward and staggered into the open air.

The cheering crowd brought her to her senses. She was in the middle of the Hogwarts Quidditch pitch and there was a game in progress. One look at the players told her it was Gryffindor vs. Slytherin. Marlie was instantly recognisable, her hair flowing out behind her.

The crowd were on their feet screaming. Deanna followed their gaze and felt her heart shoot into her mouth as the Snitch gleamed into view. Both Seekers were focused on it, and were heading for a collision.

"Go on, Marlie!" Deanna whispered. Marlie was a far better flier than the other Seeker, and certainly seemed to be winning. Until, that is, clouds covered the sun and it went dark. Deanna shivered with cold. Then from behind her, she suddenly felt a wave of pure evil hit her. A sense of foreboding looming over her, she slowly turned round.

She'd never seen them before, but there was no mistaking them for anything else. Those grey, hooded figures were the stuff of every mage child's nightmares, the dreaded Dementors of Azkaban. However, although Deanna felt cold at the mere sight of them, their attention was directed, not at her, but at the game above.

Deanna followed their gaze and saw with horror that Marlie had pulled up sharply. She was clutching her head and struggling to stay conscious. The other Slytherins were also motionless. The Gryffindors, however, were unaffected, and appeared to be taking full advantage. Their blonde Seeker was heading straight for the Snitch, and was going to win if someone didn't do something. Deanna stared at the Dementors again. Surely, somewhere, there was a charm her mother had told her about, a charm that could repel Dementors. Raising her wand, she pointed it at them and searched her memory for the words. She remembered an occasion when she was six, scared that there was a Dementor hiding in her wardrobe. And her mother gently letting her hold her wand and teaching her the charm that would get rid of them. She'd raised her mother's wand, recalled a happy memory and shouted the words, shouted the words...

"Expecto Patronum!" she screamed at the Dementors. To her surprise, something huge and silvery like a giant bird of prey soared out of her wand and flew towards the Dementors, scattering them. The sun came out again, and the darkness was gone. Deanna turned back to the game. Most of the Slytherins appeared to have come back to life, and Mike Lovegood sent a Bludger towards the Gryffindor Seeker, causing her to swerve to avoid it and lose sight of the Snitch in the process. The Seeker howled in rage and returned to circling. However, Deanna's eyes were still fixed on Marlie, and she saw that all was still not well with the Slytherin Seeker.

High above, Marlie had been first to see the Snitch, glinting away to her left. Immediately, she'd been onto it, glad to see that Morticia, far away at the other end of the pitch had yet to notice. And although Morticia did not take long to see her and start giving chase, she was still lagging behind. I've got it, Marlie thought. I'm going to win!

A cloud covered the sun. Marlie felt her skin begin to crawl. She looked down, and pulled up sharply as she saw the Dementors. "Oh gods." she whispered, terrified. "Gods, no, not Dementors, please no." She felt her senses go numb as a cold mist descended. All sort of memories began to crowd into her brain, none of them pleasant. Her father not recognising her. Her mother locking her up in the cellar. Fred Weasley and Morticia flirting. The decision made, so many years ago, locked in her bedroom, not to play with Morticia anymore. Voices belonging to her parents, her brother, her teachers echoed around her brain, telling her *"You're no good, you'll never amount to anything, you're weak, you're a fool, you're an airhead, you're a bad girl, we won't love you anymore unless you're perfect."* She clutched her head in fear and pain.

"No, no, no, please, leave me alone." she whimpered. Her head reeled and she felt dizzy. She didn't notice the flash of silver on the ground causing the Dementors to scatter like pigeons from a cat, or the sun warming her again. She felt faint suddenly, and couldn't stop herself slipping off her broom and plummeting towards the ground.

Deanna looked up in horror as Marlie slipped from her broom and fell like a stone. From that height, Marlie could never survive a fall. Out came the wand again as Deanna did the only reasonable thing. "*Wingardium Leviosa!*" The Levitation Charm did the trick and Marlie was brought gently in to land.

Marlie's eyes opened as she touched down. Deanna ran straight over to her.

"Marlie, are you alright?" Deanna gasped, worn out by her efforts.

She nodded mutely. "Yeah, I'm OK. What happened?"

"Dementors. They made you fall off your broom. They're gone now though. What's up, Marlie? What's happening?" Deanna stared at her in concern.

Marlie seemed to realise where she was. "The Snitch!" she screamed. "I've got to get back up there, if Morticia gets to the Snitch, I'm finished!"

Deanna soothed her. "It's alright, the Gryffindors lost it. They're all coming in to land, Madam Hooch has ended the game." It was true. The teams were touching down, and Morticia looked simply furious.

"Who's that?" Deanna asked, indicating Morticia. Marlie looked perplexed.

"That's Morticia." she said, bewildered. "She's my evil twin, I've got to defeat her to get home. I thought you knew that."

Deanna shook her head. "How should I know what's going on inside your head? I've only just got here."

Marlie blinked. "You mean, you're not part of me? You're the real Deanna?" She suddenly realised just how real Deanna looked. Not as if she belonged here, like Dream Deanna. And not wraithlike and insubstantial as she had been by the stream, but here, solid and unbelievably real. Next to her, everything else seemed ghostly and false. This was the real Deanna, here, now, and part of her dream. "How?" Marlie asked, stunned.

"Mum and Snape sent me over. To try and rescue you. Not doing too badly so far, am I?" Deanna grinned wryly.

"Thank you." Marlie whispered. "It was your charm that broke my fall, wasn't it?"

Deanna nodded. "I got rid of the Dementors for you too. Good thing one of us listened to her mother. I wouldn't have known about the Patronus charm without her."

Marlie was too impressed to be angry. "Wow, you got rid of Dementors! Only really powerful Aurors can do that!"

"Yes, well, we have more pressing worries at the moment. Your evil twin's coming this way and she looks hacked off for some reason. Wands out, you reckon?" Marlie nodded, and they turned to face her, wands at the ready.

Morticia did a double take when she saw Deanna. Even more enraged, she snarled at her, "You're not meant to be here! You're an intruder! That's cheating, inviting others in, Marlene. This is our fight!"

"I didn't invite her, she just turned up." Marlene retorted. "And bringing in Dementors when it looks like you might lose a Quidditch match isn't exactly fighting fair either!"

Morticia shrugged. "I didn't call them. They were your own inner fears and self-doubts holding you back. As usual. But they're not your worst fear, are they?" Morticia was grinning. "I do believe this is." The scenery wobbled and then disappeared. They found themselves in a dark, underground chamber. It was long and low, with pillars forming a central avenue. At one end was a statue of a cruel looking bearded wizard who Deanna recognised instantly.

"Salazar Slytherin?" she whispered incredulously.

"Greatest of the Hogwarts Four." Morticia hissed. "Source of your power. And of your worst fear, sister. Watch for the one who can call the Serpent!"

At her words, a tall shadowy figure stepped out of the darkness. Clad in black, he was no one any of them had seen before, yet they all knew immediately who he was. You don't need telling when one of your nightmares comes to life. He had a bald, white head looking more like a skull than anything, two nostril slits where his nose should be, and horrifying red eyes.

Marlie screamed. Deanna's heart was beating so fast she thought it was going to explode. However, she had courage enough to name him.

"Voldemort!" she whispered. "Oh gods, oh gods."

"One brave enough to name me." Voldemort hissed. "I'm impressed. But you're not that brave, are you, Deanna? Your ancestors would be most disappointed in you. But not as disappointed as yours, Marlene."

Marlie didn't answer. She just hid her eyes and whimpered. Voldemort laughed.

"So pathetic. Such a miserable specimen. Best to put it out of its misery. Although you are wise to hide your eyes, Marlene." He turned to the statue of Salazar Slytherin. "Speak to me Slytherin, greatest of the Hogwarts Four!" The statue's mouth opened and Deanna glimpsed something moving deep inside. Out of the darkness came something silver, moving stealthily out of the gloom. Deanna realised what it was instantly, as did Marlie, who peeked between her fingers, screamed and buried her face in Deanna's robes.

"The Slytherin Serpent!" Marlie was sobbing. "Please no, not that!" Deanna felt her blood go cold. Voldemort's warning to hide their eyes rang in her ears, as did stories her mother had once told her about what species the Slytherin Serpent was meant to be. She immediately screwed her own eyes tight shut. A basilisk's eyes could kill instantly. And there was no mistaking it. The Slytherin Basilisk was slithering nearer, and it seemed hungry. Deanna risked a peek. It was heading straight for them.

"Run!" she cried. Marlene staggered after her, sobbing in fear. They ran around the chamber, dodging behind pillars, blindly stumbling, terrified to even open their eyes in case they caught its deadly gaze. Voldemort was laughing at them.

"Run, my little ones! The three blind mice, see how they run. Ah, such sport is this!"

Deanna dragged Marlie behind a pillar. "This is no good, Marlie." she said softly. "We're tiring already. All he has to do is wear us down and then he has us. We need to blind that snake somehow."

"How?" Marlie whispered, her breath coming in gasps and sobs.

"We split up. You run, distract it. I'll use the Conjunctivitis Curse to blind it while it goes after you. Then we'll have a fighting chance."

Marlie felt sick. This sounded suicidal. However, since it looked like she was going to die anyway, she might as well die fighting. As long as it was quick.

"Alright." she whispered. Turning away, she dashed into the open. "Here!" she shouted. "Over here! Stand and fight, you legless git!" The basilisk turned towards her. Marlie ran in the opposite direction, all the while taunting it. The snake went for her, as Deanna had hoped. Taking careful aim, she whispered "*Conjunctivo!*" The curse hit the basilisk squarely in one of its eyes, causing that eye to start weeping and close up immediately.

The basilisk turned furiously to face her. Deanna shut her eyes again and turned to run. It still had one eye working after all. Marlie watched in horror as the basilisk chased

Deanna across the chamber. Then screamed as Deanna tripped and went rolling across the floor. The basilisk seized it's chance and reared back to strike. Marlie screamed "Deanna, no!" and buried her face in her hands as the snake darted forward and sank it's fangs into Deanna's arm. Deanna screamed in pain, and curled up in a heap. Voldemort, laughing, called off the snake and watched triumphantly.

Marlie ran to Deanna's side, tears rolling down her face. Deanna was clutching her arm in agony, her face pale and white. Her robes were covered in blood. Marlie cradled Deanna in her arms.

"Deanna, I'm so sorry, so sorry!" Marlie wept. "Don't leave me here, don't die, please."

Deanna shook her head, and gazed up at her. "Too late, Marlie. I'm dying, mate. All down to you now." She winced as the poison began to take hold. "Marlie, I'm sorry. Sorry I was so horrible to you. I care about you, I love you, you're my friend."

Marlie wept to hear this. "I love you too." she sobbed helplessly. "Please fight it, I need you! I can't do this alone."

Deanna's speech was starting to slur and her eyes were glazed now. "Sorry, mate. Tell Mum I don't blame her, it's not her fault. Or Snape's. Look after Luella for me, I think you know why." Deanna stirred and looked up at Marlie in pain. She forced a smile. "See ya in my next life, mate." Deanna looked deep into Marlie's eyes and smiled. She took one last, ragged breath and fell back. The light went out of her eyes, and the breathing stopped. Marlie howled in rage and grief.

"Deanna!" she screamed. But it was too late. Deanna was gone. Marlie buried her face in Deanna's hair and wept, giving herself over completely to the grief now flooding through her.

Chapter Seventeen: A Time For Forgiving

In the Hogwarts hospital wing, several hours had gone by. No change had been noticed in either girl. Luella was sitting next to Mrs. Tyler, who, although looking better than she had, still seemed on the edge of cracking up. Snape was pacing impatiently around the room, constantly looking at the girls, then at Mrs. Tyler, then back at the girls again.

"Try and relax, Severus." Dumbledore said kindly. "You'll be no use to anyone if you exhaust yourself like this."

"Relax?!" Snape almost screamed. "I've got the lives of these two hanging in the balance, this is a highly risky and experimental procedure which has never been performed on anyone in a Sleeping Death trance before, I've got to face the wrath of Mel Lovegood and the knowledge of what it'll do to Caitlin if it goes wrong, and you expect me to relax?" He stopped pacing, nearly at breaking point.

Dumbledore seemed unperturbed. "Severus, I understand your feelings, but there's nothing you can do for either of them at the moment. Sit down. They both seem fine at the moment. Miss Lovegood's picked up considerably in the last hour or two." It was true, Marlie had improved greatly since the ritual began, and Deanna did not seem to have worsened.

However, it seemed Dumbledore had spoken too soon. No sooner had Snape agreed to take a seat, than Deanna let out a piercing scream and went limp. Marlie screamed "Deanna, no!" Madam Pomfrey immediately leapt to her feet and began examining the scroll on which her vital signs were being written. Luella looked at the lines that were being etched on there by the enchanted quills. They were almost flat. Madam Pomfrey looked deeply concerned.

"Something's wrong. Deanna's breathing's erratic, her temperature's taken a dive and her heartbeat is slowing. We should get her back immediately."

Mrs. Tyler screamed in terror. Snape shot to his feet, shock etched all over his face. He raced to Deanna's side and held her cold, pale face in his hands. Turning on Mrs. Tyler, his eyes glittering, he snarled at her "Don't just sit there, woman! Get her out of there!"

Mrs. Tyler got to her feet, trembling. She looked as pale as her daughter, but to her credit, she didn't fall apart. She stood between them, touched her wand to Deanna's head and intoned, "Deanna Melissa Tyler, I summon you back to your own body. *Veni! Accio! Returnus!*" Deanna shifted in her sleep. Marlie yelped in pain and whimpered softly, whispering Deanna's name over and over again, begging her not to leave. Deanna gasped then relaxed. Her breathing seemed to ease, and Madam Pomfrey breathed a sigh of relief.

"Her heartbeat, temperature and breathing are returning to normal. She'll be fine, I think."

Snape nodded curtly. "Separate them, then." Mrs. Tyler waved her wand between them in a sharp, cutting motion.

"Essence parts from essence. They are two, not one." She nodded at Snape, who took up the knife again and severed the bonds holding their wrists together. Their arms fell limply to their sides. Mrs. Tyler intoned "The bond is broken, the gateway is closed. Deanna Melissa Tyler is herself alone. Marlene Jessamyn Lovegood is herself alone. They are two, themselves, whole and parted." She let her arms fall to her sides. "It's done."

Snape got up and touched his wand to Deanna's hand. "*Asclepio*," he whispered. The wound healed instantly. He did the same to Marlie. He then produced another potion. Lifting Deanna with one hand, he uncorked the vial with the other and let the potion dribble into her mouth. Deanna swallowed, coughed, blinked and woke gasping. She gazed around her for a minute as if unsure where she was.

"What happened?" she whispered.

"Name yourself." Snape said sharply.

"Deanna Tyler." Deanna replied.

"Your parents' names?"

"Caitlin Tyler is my mother, I don't know what my father's name was."

"Your birthday and age?"

"16th July. I'm eleven."

"Who is the headmaster of Hogwarts?"

"Professor Dumbledore."

"Do you know a woman named Claudia Sherrington?"

Deanna looked blank. "Never heard of her."

"No reason why you should have. She was a Muggle socialite noted in our world only for her marriage to one-time Department of Magical Law Enforcement Head Mandragor Harker which produced two daughters, Narcissa and Melissa. The second of whom I believe gave you your middle name." Snape allowed himself to relax.

"Welcome back, Miss Tyler." He seemed to sag with pure relief. Mrs. Tyler abandoned all reserve and flung her arms around her daughter.

"Thank the gods, thank the gods you're alright! I was so afraid we'd lose you! Thank the gods you're OK!" Mrs. Tyler sobbed as she hugged her daughter tightly. Luella glanced at Snape. He was gazing at Deanna and her mother, both holding each other, Mrs. Tyler sobbing with relief, with an unfathomable look on his face. "Too much." he said softly. "This was too much to ask."

Luella turned away from him, and went to see how her friend was. "Deanna, what happened to you? Are you OK? How's Marlie?"

Deanna furrowed her brow, thinking. Suddenly, she screamed "Marlie!" and began struggling against her mother. "Let me go, I have to see Marlie, have to see if she's OK!"

"She's still asleep, love." Mrs. Tyler said gently. Deanna squirmed all the more furiously.

"I've got to get back in there, Mum! She's in danger, there's a basilisk in there, Voldemort too, if I don't get back she'll be next! Mum, you've got to let me go back!" Deanna pleaded.

Snape stood firm. "Miss Tyler, you are not repeating the ritual. Even if Miss Lovegood is in danger. I don't want two dead students on my hands."

"Who asked you?" Deanna snarled before turning back to her mother. "Mum, please, send me back!"

Mrs. Tyler, however, agreed with Snape. "Professor Snape is quite right, Deanna. You're not going back. There is no way I am going through that again. At least Marlie is no worse off."

Deanna protested, but it was to no avail. With both Snape and her mother opposed, there was nothing she could do. So she reluctantly took a seat next to Luella, let Madam Pomfrey remove the monitoring crystals from her and joined the vigil.

Marlie knelt on the floor of the chamber, staring numbly at the ground. Deanna's body had faded into nothingness shortly after she'd died, and now there was just her blood on the stones to mark what had happened. Marlie's initial grief had passed to leave a numb ache of desolation. She could hardly believe it. Deanna Tyler was dead.

Footsteps approached her. Listlessly, she turned around. Voldemort was watching her, a twisted smile on his face. Not far away, the basilisk was curled up, dozing.

"Well now, Lovegood. See what true power can accomplish. Your worst enemy dead. Aren't you happy?"

"She's not my worst enemy. She was my friend. I loved her. You murdered her." Marlie said dully.

Voldemort just laughed. "She would never have let you realise your true potential. Had you stayed with her you would always have remained in her shadow. Join me, and I'll show you what power really is. You'll learn how to wield your own power. You won't fear it any more, and you can control it, instead of it controlling you. Join me, Marlene. I can set you free. I can send you home."

"Never. I'd rather die." Marlie said quietly. It was true. Right now, death seemed the most attractive option.

Morticia was laughing, leaning against a nearby pillar. "You fool, Marlie. All your life, you've let your power rule you, and now when given the chance to change that, you turn it down? What sort of Slytherin are you? Lord Voldemort, finish her. Put me in charge. I'll help you." She gazed at Voldemort hungrily. Voldemort, far from accepting the offer, gave her a look of absolute disdain.

"I didn't ask you, Shadow. I only deal with whole souls, not disaffected parts of them. And tell me, pray, what right a Gryffindor has to walk in this hall of Slytherin?"

Morticia's face went as red as her Quidditch robes. However, the colour drained from her face as Voldemort motioned to the basilisk. "Deal with her." he said to it. The giant snake rose up and began to pursue Morticia. She screamed and, eyes shut, stumbled away. Marlie gasped in shock. Without thinking twice, she waved her wand, crying, "*Accio* Cleansweep!" Her broom was in her hands in seconds. Leaping onto the back of it, she swooped towards Morticia who was cowering on the ground, trying to shield herself from the basilisk about to strike. Marlie leaned forward, forcing all the broom's speed out of it. The basilisk pounced, but met only empty air. In the nick of time, Marlie sped past Morticia, grabbing her round the waist and pulling her on to the broom, then flying out of harm's way into the eaves of the chamber.

Voldemort howled with rage. The snake hissed furiously, cheated of it's prey. Morticia turned to Marlie in shock as they rode precariously above.

"You saved me!" she whispered, her voice sounding for the first time normal. "You could have let me die, but you saved me. Why?"

Marlie looked at her properly for the first time. So this was her shadow and her childhood friend. She remembered playing with her as a child and all the good times they'd had. Impulsively, she reached out and hugged Morticia, a rush of love filling her.

"I can't let you die!" Marlie said, realising for the first time how much she needed Morticia. "You're the sister I never had. You're my friend. You're..." She choked on tears, but carried on. "You're me."

Morticia's features changed from shock to a strange bittersweet mixture of sadness and joy. She threw her arms around Marlie and held her tightly. Marlie looked down to where Voldemort was still raging at them to come down, promising the world to Marlie if she surrendered Morticia to him.

"What do we do about him, Tish?" Marlie asked her, beginning to grin. Voldemort's rage and fury was quite funny to watch now they weren't actually in danger. Morticia still looked worried though.

"I don't know!" she said anxiously. "He... he's not part of us, Marlie. I needed extra power so I called him in from the magical collective mind. And now I don't know how to make him leave!" She looked despairing. Marlie looked at Voldemort more

closely. He did look different. Real, like Deanna had done. Marlie immediately regretted that, as Deanna's image brought tears to her eyes again. Stop that, I need to think, she thought to herself.

"Tish, any ideas at all? How did you summon him? I mean, if he's not really part of me, then he doesn't belong here and I can make him leave, surely?"

Morticia looked thoughtful. "Yes, I suppose you could. I mean, you are the dominant one here, you have the self-consciousness. I'm only a creation of your psyche, you are in charge of it. He can only enter if part of someone's soul admits him, but once in, he's very powerful. Only the dominant part has the power to make him leave and only then if the rest of the soul supports her. Even the Baron can only control Peeves if the rest of the ghosts back him up."

"You support me though, don't you?" Marlie said craftily. Morticia nodded, an evil grin spreading across her features.

"Of course, sister. What do you think? Shall we?"

Marlie nodded. Morticia produced a wand, and Marlie turned the broom around, so it was pointing at Voldemort. Wands held high, they both clutched the broom tightly as Marlie kicked it into gear and charged at him. Voldemort's look of fury turned to one of horror as the broom sped towards him. As he ran for cover, both girls pointed their wands at him.

"Begone from my soul, Voldemort!" Marlie yelled, saying his name for the first time in her life. "And never come back! You don't belong here, you have no power here. Begone! Begone! Begone! *Expulso!*" Light shot out from their wands and hit Voldemort head on. With a scream he disappeared, and the scene began to dissolve around them, breaking apart in chunks and floating away to leave only the night sky. Marlie pulled the broom out of the dive and sent it soaring upwards into the night. Above them, the full moon and stars shone down, sparkling as if to congratulate them. A sense of heaviness and oppression had disappeared, and Marlie realised she'd never felt so free before. Never so happy. She leant back and yelled with delight.

Morticia laughed. Marlie smiled. It was a change to hear Morticia laughing for the sheer hell of it. "Now what, Tish?" she asked, good naturedly.

"Time you went home, sister." Morticia said, a hint of sadness in her voice.

Marlie's face fell. "Already? But it's so nice here now!"

"Of course it is. But you can't stay navel-gazing forever. At some point, you've got to return to the real world. Don't look so sad, Marlie." Morticia said gently. "This is your soul. This place will always be part of you. In your dreams, and when you need it, this place is open to you always. I am here for you always." Morticia looked keenly at her. "If you ever need me, call on me. I will come. My power is at your disposal."

Marlie hugged Morticia again. "Tish, I'm going to miss you so much!"

"Miss me?" Morticia raised an eyebrow. "Marlie, you fool, we're never apart. I'll visit your dreams, promise. You'll see me again. Now, I must go. But before I do, just one last thing." She indicated one star that glimmered more brightly than the rest.

"Which star's that?" Marlie asked. It didn't look familiar.

"Not a star at all. The Golden Snitch." Morticia said quietly. "It's a Portkey. One touch will take you home. All you have to do is catch it, but that shouldn't be a problem for a Seeker as good as you."

Marlie smiled, tears rolling down her cheeks. "Thank you." she whispered. "I love you, Tish, you know that?"

Morticia looked away, embarrassed but smiling. "Marlie, you sentimental fool. I love you too. Now goodbye. See you around."

"Tish, wait!" Marlie cried. But it was too late. Morticia was fading away and within seconds, she was gone. Marlie felt a lump in her throat. She recalled Morticia's words. This place would always be part of her. Morticia would always be part of her. Feeling better, she turned her broom towards the Snitch. Time to go home. Speeding up, she felt the breeze whip her hair up, and the stars stream past her. This was just another Quidditch game, and that Snitch was as good as hers. Reaching out her hand, she felt it close around the tiny golden ball. As she caught hold of it, she felt something grab her insides, heard a whooshing noise and felt everything around her fade to black as she was hurled into space.

The silence in the small room was becoming oppressive. Marlie's condition was worsening, and even Dumbledore was beginning to lose hope. Would she make it? Several times, Mrs. Tyler had told Luella and Deanna they could go to bed if they wanted, but both had declined the offer. Deanna absolutely refused to leave Marlie, and Luella had no intention of going without her. Snape didn't say anything, just kept sneaking looks of quiet concern at Mrs. Tyler and Deanna. Dumbledore and Madam Pomfrey kept pouring over Marlie's vital signs readings looking very grim indeed.

All that changed around midnight. The Hogwarts clock could be heard in the distance chiming the hour. Suddenly, Marlie shrieked and sat bolt upright in bed. All of them started and looked at her in fright. Deanna remembered seeing her do something similar in her sleep before and expected this to be just part of the dream. Until Marlie sagged, relaxed a little and began looking around her, blinking in the torchlight, and coughing a little on the incense smoke.

Dumbledore glanced at Madam Pomfrey. "All signs normal." she whispered. "She's awake!"

Dumbledore immediately stepped towards her. "Miss Lovegood, are you alright?" Marlie looked at him and nodded. "Am I home?" she whispered.

"Yes, Miss Lovegood, you most certainly are." Dumbledore smiled. Marlie gazed around her, taking it all in. "What was happening here?" she asked in wonder.

"We were performing the Dream Weaver ritual. Deanna was sent in to try and help you. It seems to have worked."

Marlie nodded mutely. Then her eyes flew open as if she suddenly had remembered something.

"Deanna!" she screamed, before bursting into tears. "Professor, I'm so sorry, I couldn't save her, Voldemort got her, I'm so sorry." she wept helplessly.

Dumbledore smiled at her gently. "Miss Lovegood, there is nothing to apologise for. Deanna Tyler is perfectly safe, and right here."

Deanna got to her feet, trembling. Marlie looked at her and her jaw dropped. "You're alive!" she whispered. Deanna smiled and nodded. Next thing, she'd covered the distance between them and reached out to hug Marlie. The two girls held each other tightly, tears flowing down both their faces.

"You're alive, you're alive." Marlie whispered. "But how? I saw you bitten by a basilisk, you died in my arms!"

"It was only a dream, Marlie." Mrs. Tyler said softly from behind them. "We were able to bring her back in time. But it was a close thing and we came very close to losing her. Very close indeed." Luella noticed that her eyes were also filling with tears. Snape was staring fixedly away so no one could see his face. Marlie and Deanna didn't say anything, just held each other closely.

Dumbledore broke the silence. "Well, I daresay we've all had quite enough excitement for one evening. I think it's time we all went to bed. I need to write to Miss Lovegood's parents and tell them the good news. Caitlin, you may spend the night in the hospital wing if you wish." Mrs. Tyler nodded gratefully. Dumbledore smiled and continued. "Miss Lovegood will, no doubt, need to spend a few days in the hospital wing recovering, but I am sure she'll be able to return to her common room by next week. As for Miss Martin and Miss Tyler, you two should go straight to your dorm and recover. I would like to ask you to tell no one until Professor Snape has had a chance to inform Michael Lovegood. After that, you may tell whoever you wish, and no doubt will." He smiled benevolently at them. Luella grinned at Deanna. She might be vulnerable now, but given time and a few retellings of the story, getting bitten by a basilisk and nearly dying would become single handedly wrestling three basilisks, twelve Dementors, a whole legion of Death Eaters and taking Voldemort himself on in a duel.

They both hugged Marlie and promised to visit her again in the morning. Marlie grinned and said she could hardly wait. "Bring Rianne, we'll have a good old gossip. We've got so much to catch up on!"

Deanna smiled and turned to leave. Luella noticed that Marlie's right hand was clutched tight, holding something.

"What's that you've got there, Marlie?" Marlie looked at it, puzzled. She opened her hand. Nestling inside it was a tiny, motionless Golden Snitch.

Professor Snape escorted Deanna and Luella back to the Serpent's Nest. None of them said very much to each other. That night's experiences were still too fresh to be discussed. At length, Deanna broke the silence.

"Luella."

"Yes, Deanna."

"About that banner."

"Yes?"

"Any chance we could get it taken down?"

"Why's that?" Luella asked, curiously.

"Because if I ever see another Slytherin Serpent again, I think I'll end up killing someone."

Luella wasn't sure how to react to that. It was Snape who answered her.

"So Miss Lovegood was telling the truth. You were bitten by a basilisk." Luella detected a slight tremble in his voice, as if he was struggling with himself.

Deanna nodded. "Voldemort set it on us. I blinded it in one eye so we could have a fighting chance against it, and it bit me. I thought I was going to die. According to Marlie, I did."

When Snape spoke again, it was with great difficulty. "You came very close to it. We thought we were going to lose you." He paused. "That was a very courageous thing you did tonight. Not many would have done that. Or could have."

Deanna shuffled her feet and looked at the ground. "Well, Marlie did most of the work, you know. She had to get her head together and wake up without me." she said quietly

"That may be true. But she didn't have a choice. You did. And that is why I'm giving you thirty house points."

Deanna's jaw dropped. Luella gasped in astonishment. "Thirty points! Thank you, sir!" Deanna whispered.

Snape shrugged. "Think nothing of it. It's the least I could do for putting you and your mother through that. I believe this is where I leave you both." They had reached the

entrance to the Serpent's Nest. Snape inclined his head and set off for his office, after seeing Luella and Deanna through the door into the common room.

Needless to say, Rianne bombarded them with questions as soon as they walked into their dorm.

"Where the hell were you? And don't tell me you were studying with Snape. Neither Snape nor you two were in there when I checked at half nine. And you weren't in the library either." She gave them an accusing look. "Where were you and more to the point, why wasn't I invited?"

Luella and Deanna looked at each other and sighed. "Do you want to tell her or shall I?" Deanna said.

"You do it. You're so much better at dramatising things, and besides, I don't know the half of what went on."

So Deanna told them her side of things, with Luella chipping in to explain what had happened while Deanna was in trance. Both Luella and Rianne were stunned to hear that Deanna had saved Marlie from a pack of Dementors.

"The Patronus charm?" Rianne gasped. "Deanna, that's really advanced magic! How?"

Deanna shrugged. "I don't know. I can only assume that as they weren't real Dementors but Marlie's fears, I was unaffected and could dispel them without a thought."

When Deanna had finished, Rianne was open-mouthed. "I can't believe you did all that! Why didn't you let me in on any of it, I'd've watched! Hell, Lu and me would have joined you if we'd known!"

Deanna looked rather embarrassed at this. "Well, I didn't want you two to worry. Snape wouldn't have let you two do it anyway. I don't think he was entirely happy about me."

"He wasn't." Luella said. "You didn't see him after they'd sent you in. The way he was comforting Mrs. Tyler. The look on his face when it looked like we might lose you. And the relief when we got you back alright. Plus that thirty points he gave you. I think Snapey's rather fond of you, mate." Luella grinned at her friend.

"Don't say things like that." Deanna shuddered. "I don't want him being fond of me! Can't stand the oily git."

Rianne looked rather offended. "He's not that bad. I can't see what you're worried about, he's a very good teacher. And thirty points, did you say? Wow, Deanna, you're so lucky! I wish he'd give me thirty points." Rianne looked positively envious.

"Bet that's not all you'd like him to give you." Deanna murmured quietly. Luella caught her eye and grinned, trying not to laugh.

Rianne pretended she hadn't heard her. "I think," she said in her coldest Head Girl in waiting tones, "that it is high time we all went to bed. It's late, and we've all had quite enough for one evening. Haven't we?" She gave them frosty looks.

"Yes, Rianne." Luella and Deanna murmured as they slunk off to bed. Deanna winked at her friend as she slipped between the sheets. Luella, much comforted by the fact that Deanna appeared to have fully recovered, crawled into bed smiling, and was asleep within minutes.

They didn't have to wait long for news to get around. Mike was led off by Professor Snape after breakfast, and came rushing over to them during morning break.

"She's awake!" he told them delightedly. "She's going to be OK! And she reckons you helped her!" He seemed lost for words. Unable to say anything, he suddenly swept Deanna into his arms and squeezed her madly before planting a kiss on her cheek. Deanna staggered back, with an oddly blissed out look on her face.

"You saved my sister! How can I ever repay you?" Mike had tears of happiness rolling down his face.

Deanna mumbled something unintelligible, the shock of having been spontaneously hugged and kissed by the best-looking male in Slytherin having temporarily removed any ability to think and talk rationally.

Rianne intervened, a grin on her face. "I think what Deanna is trying to say is that it was nothing really, anyone would have done the same, and Marlie did most of the work herself, so no reason to go over board and pledge undying gratitude or anything like that, although if you're offering the entire Lovegood fortune and a proposal of marriage she wouldn't say no."

Deanna seemed to recover herself at this. "Rianne, shut up!" she hissed. Turning to Mike, blushing furiously, she said "Well, it wasn't really that difficult, you know. Marlie did wake herself up without my help."

"Rubbish." Mike said, grinning. "She told me about you taking on a pack of Dementors by yourself. And facing that basilisk. There's not many first years who'd have done that. Anyway, I just wanted to say thank you. My family owe you so much!"

Deanna dismissed him. "No you don't. Marlie's a friend, there's no debts between friends. I'll settle for your mother inviting me over a little more often and a go on your Cleansweep now and then."

"Done." Mike grinned. "Anyway, I've got History of Magic next, so I'll be seeing you tonight probably. Must dash, Kat and Summer will be over the moon to hear about this!" And with that, he was off to join the other third years.

Rianne and Luella were both grinning at Deanna. "Well, well, well." Rianne commented. "Now we know who sets your candle alight, don't we, Lu?"

Deanna glared at them both. "Will you leave it out? I was merely surprised by his response, that's all. Honestly, you two. Always insinuating something. Lu, make her stop."

Luella decided to support Deanna. "Come on Ri, he is the best looking Slytherin in the school. Cut her a little slack. After all, there are those among us with far more embarrassing crushes, aren't there?" She gave Rianne a knowing look. Deanna looked from one to the other, baffled but intrigued.

"Luella, you promised you wouldn't tell her!" Rianne howled.

"Tell me what?" Deanna asked, beginning to grin, curious now.

"Can't. I promised Ri I wouldn't say." Luella was enjoying herself immensely. Not often did she get the chance to wind up two friends at once. "Come on, let's go see Marlie." She headed for the hospital wing with her friends in tow, one begging her to spill the beans, the other threatening her with all sorts of nasty curses if she said anything.

Marlie looked much stronger when they saw her. Rianne went straight to her and hugged her tightly. "You made it! Well done, kid, we had every confidence in you." Deanna rolled her eyes. Rianne had been the least optimistic of the three, but she decided against telling Marlie this.

"It's good to have you back, Marlie." Luella said, her eyes shining.

"It's good to be back." Marlie laughed. "I tell you, I never want to sleep again after that. How long was I out for?"

Deanna and Luella looked at each other. How to tell her she'd missed three months?

Rianne said gently, "Marlie, it's Candlemas Day. The day of Persephone's return from the Underworld. Appropriate, really."

Marlie's eyes widened in shock. "Candlemas?? But it was Halloween when... Great Goddess Artemis, do you mean to tell me I've missed three whole months?"

The three girls nodded.

Marlie stared incredulously. "But... I've missed Christmas!" They nodded, sadly. "And my birthday!" she wept. Rianne nodded. Marlie's twelfth birthday, 25th November, had come and gone.

"Not to mention all the schoolwork you'll have to catch up on." Rianne said, a knowing twinkle in her eyes. Marlie wailed with anguish.

They were interrupted by the door of Marlie's room flying open. Mr. and Mrs. Lovegood burst in, hardly daring to believe their eyes when they saw Marlie sitting up and talking.

"Marlie! My baby!" Mrs. Lovegood cried, running to hug her daughter. Mr. Lovegood did likewise, his face alive with joy. The three girls backed off and let the Lovegoods fuss over their highly embarrassed daughter. Mrs. Lovegood, breaking away, turned to them and began thanking them profusely for all they'd done for Marlie, before to Deanna's horror, actually hugging and kissing her.

Caitlin Tyler and Professor Snape watched from the corridor. Both were smiling.

"Such a relief, knowing it's all over, isn't it, Severus?" Caitlin commented casually.

"It is indeed." Snape said. "I for one am glad we need never go through that again."

"Absolutely." Caitlin agreed fervently. "Severus, I never had you down as the risk-taking type, but next time you have a crazy idea involving arcane and dangerous rituals, leave me and my daughter out of it, won't you?"

Snape grinned. "I'll try." His face became serious. "Caitlin..."

"Yes?"

"Caitlin, can you ever forgive me?"

Caitlin's face lost its merry smile. "Depends on what for. You've done so much over the years to hurt me, after all."

Snape chose to ignore the anger behind the words. "Risking Deanna's life. And asking so much from you, both magically and emotionally. I swore I'd never let any harm come to either of you, and look what nearly happened. I almost lost you both."

Caitlin patted his arm gently. "Severus," she said tenderly. "Severus, listen to me." Snape met her eyes. "Severus, we both knew the risks. I gave my consent for it to go ahead. And for what it's worth, you did well. I mean, look at what happened when Deanna nearly died!" Her voice trembled a little. "I lost it there completely. If you hadn't kept your head and snapped me out of it, we would have lost her! But we didn't. She's fine, Marlie's fine, and Mel and Lenny's marriage is fine." She indicated the scene in the room beyond, where Melissa and Leonard Lovegood were gazing mistily at each other and holding hands, much to Marlie's embarrassment and Deanna's amusement. The three girls decided to leave them to it at that point, and came out to join them.

Caitlin greeted them with a smile. "Hello dears. How are you feeling this morning?"

"Fantastic. It's great to have her back, isn't it?" Deanna said, glowing with pride.

Luella regarded Caitlin with concern. "Mrs. Tyler, are you OK? You looked exhausted last night." Luella had not forgotten the sight of Mrs. Tyler sinking into a chair with Snape comforting her.

"I'm fine, dear. I've had far more stressful things to deal with before now." Caitlin reassured her. "Amazing what a good night's sleep can accomplish."

Snape looked highly irritated at having his conversation interrupted. "Don't you three have lessons to go to?" he snapped.

"On our way, sir." Rianne said deferentially, before ushering Luella and Deanna along.

Caitlin watched them go, a smile creeping across her lips. "Those four remind me so much of us, Mel and Lily when we were young, it's frightening. What do you think they'll be up to next?"

"Organising the welcome back party, I don't doubt. And given that your daughter is involved, who by the way is the most devious child I've ever encountered, well done, it will no doubt involve countless minor infringements of school rules, enough petty theft to keep the youth courts busy for weeks and me having to intervene after we get complaints from Diagon Alley about the noise."

Caitlin laughed. "No doubt. Go easy on them, though, they've earned a celebration. I think we all have. Mel tells me she and Len are planning a holiday now. A little second honeymoon. Good for her, she's not had sex in three months." She lowered her voice, laughing conspiratorially. Snape was less than sympathetic.

"Three months? I've not had any in years. These married folk, one dry spell and they think there's a drought coming." he snapped bitterly.

Caitlin raised an eyebrow. "That long? You surprise me. I thought you'd have a string of mistresses on the side, all of whom seem to adore you in a mad, passionate sort of way despite the fact that you've never shown anything approximating kindness to any of them."

Snape laughed. "Ah, if only. Sadly, the type of poor, deluded woman who becomes slavishly in love with cold, cruel, dominant men only seems to exist in Bronte novels. I always seem to become involved with cold-hearted charmers who toy with my emotions, play me like a finely tuned musical instrument then callously abandon me. You, for instance." Despite the words, he was smiling at her.

Caitlin feigned outrage. "Severus, you know I've never been 'involved' with you!"

"Would you like to be?" Snape asked hopefully.

Caitlin choked with laughter. "You really are too much! I don't think Deanna would ever forgive me if I started seeing you." She gave him a sad smile. "Severus Snape, I don't know whether to take you seriously or not."

"What would you do if you took me seriously?" Snape asked softly.

"Run, probably. You still have the capacity to terrify me, even now." Caitlin regarded him with that same bittersweet smile.

"Then let's say I was joking then." Snape said, forcing a laugh. Something seemed to occur to him, for he suddenly held his head in his hands and moaned.

"Severus? What is it?" Caitlin said, alarmed.

"Third lesson today. Potions with the Slytherin and Gryffindor first years. Deanna Tyler and the Weasley twins in the same classroom, with Deanna in the sort of mood she currently is in. Oh gods, I can hardly wait." he said, his every word laced with sarcasm. He looked hopefully at Caitlin. "I don't suppose you want to take the lesson for me, do you?"

"No way. After last night, I'm doing you no more favours for a long time!" Caitlin laughed. "Come on, let's go. I should let you get back to the teaching you appear to love so much." Snape gave a derisive laugh. Caitlin smiled and continued. "I need to get back to the office, make sure Marcus Vetinari isn't planning a takeover bid in Mel's absence."

Snape nodded. The reality of Caitlin leaving hit him like a physical blow. "Caitlin," he began, "will we ever... I mean, that is to say," He hesitated, trying to find the right words. "Can I see you again? Just now and then. Just for a drink and a chat. No pressure, no commitment. But you were always the one I was closest to and I have to say..." He gave her his trademark hypnotic gaze. "I've missed you."

Caitlin smiled gently. "I've missed you too." She leaned up and kissed him gently on the cheek. Snape raised both eyebrows in amazement. Caitlin turned away, a bittersweet smile on her face. "But I don't know. I just don't know, Sevi."

"Don't know what, Caitlin?" Snape asked, his heart sinking.

"I don't know if it's a good idea for us to see each other."

Snape hung his head. He'd expected something like this to happen. "May I ask why?" he said softly.

Caitlin sighed. "I don't want to get hurt again." she said firmly, giving him a meaningful gaze. "I don't want my daughter getting caught in the crossfire either. I have to consider her feelings too. No one is more important to me than Deanna, no one. I might risk my own heart, but there is no way, absolutely no way, I will allow her to be hurt. Do you understand me?"

"Oh, I understand you all right, Caitlin." he said softly. He grabbed hold of her wrist. "Using your daughter as a shield to keep me at bay. Low, Caitlin. Very low. Aren't I worth the truth? Just admit I make your skin crawl and get it over with."

"Let go of me." she hissed, wrenching her wrist out of his grasp with a move that nearly broke his arm. Gasping with pain, he clutched at his arm. He'd forgotten just how strong she was.

She was gazing coldly at him with contempt. It was the look she'd given him at their last meeting before she'd gone into hiding. It had slashed his heart into ribbons then and the effect was not dissimilar now.

"You don't have a clue, do you?" she whispered. "Just don't have a clue what you did to me, do you? Listen, I helped you out for Mel's sake. I meant what I said back in December, Severus. Don't think that just because I agreed to this means I've forgiven you. I haven't. You ruined my life, Severus. I just about managed to claw my way back to sanity for Deanna's sake. I'm not jeopardising that. And I am never, ever letting you get into a position where you have that kind of power over me ever again!" Caitlin snarled at him, her eyes flashing with fury.

Snape averted his eyes. "You'd better go then." he said quietly, turning away. In a vain attempt to try and get her out from under his skin, he drew on his usual sarcastic manner. "Gods know I wouldn't want to trouble you further, after all."

Caitlin didn't answer. He heard her turning away and heading for the Floo grate. He heard her voice saying coldly "DDAE main entrance." and the roaring of the flames as they took her away once more out of his life. Snape looked to make sure she was really gone. And only then did one solitary tear make it's way out of one eye and down his cheek, before being brusquely swept away.

Chapter Eighteen: The Final Victory

It did not take long for word to get around. By lunchtime, the whole of Slytherin House had heard the news, and by evening, the whole school appeared to know. Deanna found herself being patted on the back and congratulated by her fellow Slytherins everywhere she went. Members of other houses regarded her with nothing less than awe, and whispers along the lines of "Entered her dreams, apparently." and "A whole pack of Dementors? Really?" became quite commonplace.

Even the Weasley twins were impressed. During Potions, Fred leaned over to Rianne.

"Hey, Stormosi."

"Yes, Weasley?" Rianne said tetchily, annoyed at being interrupted in the middle of her Light-Footedness Potion.

"Is it true about Deanna and Marlie?"

"What about them?" Rianne sighed.

"That Marlie's awake, and that Deanna helped her by entering her dreams and fighting off a whole pack of Dementors, a couple of dragons, some basilisks, a band of trolls, four vampires, three werewolves and You-Know-Who?"

Rianne couldn't resist a grin at this. The Hogwarts rumour mill was doing it's work already.

"Marlie is awake again, yes. And I believe Deanna did enter her dreams. However, as I was not there at the time, I couldn't possibly comment. You'll have to ask Deanna, won't you?"

Fred seemed to be considering this. He evidently decided that trying to get a straight answer out of Deanna was a non-starter, for he swiftly changed the subject.

"Is Marlie allowed visitors, do you know?"

"Close friends and family only. That's her parents, teachers, brother, Deanna, Lu, and me. You'll have to wait until she gets out of hospital next week. Although I daresay a Get Well Soon card and presents would be welcome. Now stop interrupting me, this thing's liable to explode if not watched carefully." Rianne was proved right as Geoff Foxworth's blew up and drenched him and Winter Montague, who both began tap-dancing frantically. Professor Snape snarled at them both as he administered the antidote and presented them with the necessary cleaning materials. This seemed to concentrate Fred Weasley's mind on his own potion, as Rianne was not interrupted again.

That night in the Serpent's Nest, everyone was discussing the situation. As Deanna walked in with Rianne and Luella behind her, the entire house, as one, got to its feet and gave her a standing ovation.

Deanna went bright red and turned away, highly embarrassed. She squirmed even more as Mike Lovegood got to his feet.

"Ladies and gentlemen of Slytherin House!" he cried, putting his arm around Deanna's shoulder to prevent her from following her gut reaction and running out of the door, "Most of you probably have heard one version or another of this story, but I'm going to tell you all again anyway. This first year Slytherin, this brave, courageous, heroic, devious lady we all know so well as Deanna Tyler..."

"Stop it, Lovegood. Stop it now!" Deanna muttered, dearly wishing the ground would swallow her up.

Mike continued, ignoring her. "This wonderful young lady has surpassed herself yet again. Last night, with the help of Professor Snape and Caitlin Tyler the world-famous Auror, she entered the dreams of my little sister Marlie Lovegood in order to make contact with her and help her out so that she could wake up. And as you probably all know by now, she succeeded brilliantly. Marlie is even now sat upstairs in the hospital wing, eating, drinking and talking, and it is all thanks to Deanna here! Three cheers, everybody!"

Deanna stared fiercely at the ground as the three cheers were duly given. This was followed by a rousing rendition of "For She's A Jolly Good Fellow!" Deanna glanced at Luella and Rianne, who had joined in the singing and cheering and were now grinning madly.

"Did you two know about this?" she demanded.

"Not a thing." Luella grinned.

"No, Lovegood organised this one all on his own." Rianne said.

Deanna didn't have time to respond as Mike was now calling on her to give a speech. Deanna found herself pushed to centre stage as the massed Slytherins fell quiet.

She gazed round at them, not quite sure what to say. Shuffling her feet, she began with the first words that came into her head.

"Erm, well, thank you! I never expected this at such short notice. Mike Lovegood, I'm going to torture you slowly later for showing me up like this." Mike grinned. He knew Deanna well enough to know she didn't really mean it.

"However," Deanna was continuing, "while it's all very flattering to hear all the rumours flying around about how I single-handedly saved Marlie Lovegood from trolls, dragons, Dementors, basilisks and all sorts of things that I don't remember doing for the life of me, it has to be said that I only helped Marlie. I didn't do all the work for her. Owing to a near-fatal basilisk bite, I had to withdraw from the dream at a crucial stage, leaving her to fight on on her own. In the end, it was Marlie's inner strength, power, and above all, courage that saved her in the end. And it is Marlie, not me, that you should be honouring. Which leads me to something I wanted to discuss with you all anyway, and this seems like an opportune time to do it. Marlie's welcome party."

She paused and surveyed them, her embarrassment gone and her usual self-control back. They all looked back expectantly, anticipation on the air. What off-the-wall idea was this crazy little first-year planning now?

"As you all know, Marlie has missed three months of her life because of all this. Tragic enough for anyone. Even more tragic when those three months happen to include not only Christmas but your twelfth birthday. Indeed, I was talking to Marlie only this morning, and she was saying how upset she was that she'd missed both." Looks of enlightenment were dawning on some faces, although most still looked confused. Deanna grinned and built up to the big announcement.

"Which is why the poor girl needs the welcoming party to end all welcoming parties. And we are the ones to throw it for her. And what I am suggesting is this. Seeing as she was not here for the Slytherin Christmas Party, what we are going to do is put the whole thing on again so she can relive the experience. Plus, we are going to turn it into a birthday celebration for her! A belated Christmas/birthday party! Are you with me, folks?"

A huge cheer went up from the massed crowd. Luella and Rianne gazed at Deanna in amazement. This was her best idea yet. Deanna was now turning from showman to brisk organiser. She surveyed the ranks of expectant Slytherins.

"Alright, seeing as everyone's behind me. Here's what we'll do..."

The week passed without further incident, and on Friday afternoon, Luella, Mike and Rianne went to collect Marlie.

She was fully dressed in her Hogwarts uniform, and seemed her old self again. A week of Professor Snape's strongest Strengthening Potions and Sleeping Death antidote had cleared the last of the poison out of her system and done wonders for her energy levels. Luella was amazed at how healthy Marlie looked.

Marlie was putting the last of her Get Well cards and presents into her bag.

"All set, Marlie?" Mike asked her.

"All set. I just need to make sure I've got everything. Unbelievable, really, the amount of stuff I've been given. People I barely know have been sending me things. Fred and George sent me an amusingly shaped cactus, bless them." Her smile faded to be replaced by a sharp look of reproof. "Which makes it all the more obvious that my own house have sent me nothing! Ravenclaws, Hufflepuffs, even our Gryffindor arch-rivals, have been falling over themselves to send me flowers, cards, chocolates, Quidditch related things, Zonko's toys, you name it, I've had it. If even our enemies are so generous, why, pray, are my supposed friends so apparently uncaring?"

The three of them shuffled, not knowing quite how to answer without breaking their secrecy vow.

Luella spoke up, with her usual diplomacy. "I think, Marlie, it's just that everyone wanted to give you their things in person. I mean, we did ask Madam Pomfrey if we could all come up and pay you a mass house visit, but she wasn't very keen on the idea."

Mike and Rianne were nodding enthusiastically, as if to indicate that that was the intention all along. Marlie was not fooled.

"That doesn't explain why you three and Deanna have yet to get me anything."

"Oh, Marlie, you're so materialistic." Rianne said hastily. "We avenged you and saved your life, does that mean nothing to you? Come on, let's get you back to the Nest." And with that, she ushered them all out of the room.

Lucas Vetinari was standing in the open entrance to the common room, waiting for them to come around the corner. As soon as he noticed Mike step first around the corner, his blond hair instantly recognisable in the gloom, he darted inside.

"They're coming! Everyone take your places!"

Mike entered the room first, then stepped aside so Marlie could see for herself what was going on. As she entered, the Slytherins leapt to their feet, let off party poppers,

streamers, balloons, confetti, ticker tape and whatever else they'd managed to scrounge or invent, and shouted "Surprise!!!"

Marlie dropped her bags and clasped her hands to her face in shock. "Oh my gods!" she exclaimed. "What is this?"

Mike put his arm round her. "We heard how upset you were about missing Christmas and your birthday, so we organised a little get together for you. Happy belated Birthday and Merry delayed Christmas, sis."

Marlie, lost for words, gazed around the room in shock. The Slytherins had done an excellent job. The tree was back, as flashily decorated as ever. Paper chains, tinsel and fairy lanterns were everywhere. The Slytherin banner now read "Welcome Back, Marlie!" And on a table in the far corner was a huge buffet complete with a whole roast turkey, potatoes boiled and roasted, stuffing, cranberry sauce, chipolata sausages, cheese on cocktail sticks, crisps, peanuts, Summer Montague's Special Fruit Punch and everything you could possibly wish for at a party.

"You went to all this trouble just for me!" Marlie whispered. She turned to her brother and flung her arms round him. "Thank you!"

"Don't thank me." Mike grinned. "Thank Deanna, it was her idea." Marlie turned. Deanna was standing by the fire, smiling. The Slytherins tensed. Last time they had seen Marlie and Deanna anywhere near each other for any length of time, it had usually meant much bickering and a blazing row. But a lot of water had passed under the bridge since then.

Marlie stepped forward. For a moment, the two girls did nothing but look at each other. Then, they both stepped forward simultaneously and hugged each other tightly, to the sound of rapturous applause from the onlooking Slytherins, who promptly began singing "For She's A Jolly Good Fellow".

"Welcome back, mate." Deanna whispered to Marlene.

"Thanks." Marlie whispered. They let each other go, but didn't stop looking at each other and smiling.

"You really organised all this?" Marlie asked after the singing finished.

"Sort of. It was my idea, but I couldn't have done it without this lot. Summer did her usual punch, while her, Kat, and Laetitia did the decor. Banner was me and Chris, of course, Mike and Marcus nicked the food, Jordan did the tree, party poppers and the like from Chris's dad's firm and Zonko's, with added sparkle from Lucas and Alex. And I think everyone contributed to these." She indicated the pile of presents and cards underneath the tree. Marlie gasped.

"Presents!" she squealed. She turned to Luella and Rianne. "You two, you never told me about this!"

"What, with Deanna Tyler threatening all sorts of dire punishments on anyone who spilled the beans?" Rianne snorted. "Not likely. Come on, sit down. Open them."

Marlie immediately sat down by the fire. Snowy, purring madly, leapt onto Marlie's lap and settled there. Marlie cuddled the cat, blissfully happy.

"Did you miss me, Snowy-kins?" she cooed to him. "Don't you worry, Mummy's back now. Who was looking after him?"

"Luella and me, mostly. Rianne was seen grooming and playing with him occasionally." Deanna told her. "Now, never mind the cat, let's be having your presents."

Marlie sat back as the gifts were brought for her to open. It took a long time. Finally, all but two were unwrapped. Luella and Rianne jointly presented one of them.

"We're not sure whether this really counts as a present, seeing as you designed it and all. So it's more giving back to you what belongs to you anyway. But here it is. Hope you're impressed." Rianne told her as she handed the package over. Marlie ripped it open and gasped in astonishment.

"The Walkmage!" she nearly screamed. "You... you actually built it!"

"Well, your dad did." Luella smiled. "But we were the ones who got him to do it in the first place. I'm not even going to bother telling you whose idea it was, you surely can guess by now."

Marlie, her eyes brimming with tears, turned to look at her friends. "You three are the greatest. I mean, those designs were just doodling really, I never thought it'd actually work! I never thought it'd ever get built." She wiped a tear away. "Thank you so much for making it happen, you're all wonderful!" Suddenly, her eyes narrowed in suspicion. "Just a second, those plans were hidden. So how did you..." She cast an accusing look at Deanna. "Deanna Tyler, have you been going through my personal belongings?!"

Deanna had the grace to look guilty before hastily distracting her. "You haven't opened my present yet, Marlie." she said, handing her a small box. Marlie took it from her extremely dubiously. It was a small velvety box of the kind used to store jewellery. Marlie flipped the lid open to reveal... "A Golden Snitch! On a chain!" she gasped.

"Look closer and you'll see it's not just any old Snitch." Deanna said quietly. Marlie peered at it. Her jaw dropped.

"Deanna, this is the Snitch from my dream. The one I brought back with me. You had it?" She looked stunned.

"I'm no expert on these things, but Dumbledore seemed to think it was a potentially very valuable talisman. So I, er, purloined it and sent it to your dad asking him to put a chain on it for me. Go on, put it on."

Marlie took it out of the box and unfastened it. The Snitch fell motionless as soon as she touched it. Deanna helped her fasten it around her neck.

"I will never take it off." Marlie promised her. "Thank you!"

"Kind of links in nicely to the next item on the agenda." Mike commented. "This one is something I got Sukey to knock out for you. Bring it in, please, boys!" Lucas Vetinari and Chris Bryant wheeled out a trolley. Marlie hid her face, embarrassed suddenly.

"A cake! Oh, you shouldn't have! Mikey!" It was indeed a giant birthday cake, shaped like a Snitch with twelve candles on it. The Slytherins spontaneously burst into "Happy Birthday", before Mike urged her to make a wish and blow out the candles. Marlie did so, after Rianne whipped out her camera and ordered everyone to assemble under the banner behind Marlie with her cake for a group photo.

Deanna breathed a sigh of relief. "Excellent, is that the rituals over with? Right, Luella and Rianne can sort out the tunes, everyone else form an orderly queue for the cake. After that, food, games and dancing, although not at the same time please."

Luella had the Walkmage assembled and Slade playing "Merry Xmas Everybody" in a moment before the Slytherins descended on the food. And with that the party began in earnest.

It went on for quite some time. Around half past nine, Professor Snape arrived to see what Deanna had managed come up with now.

"Hello, sir!" Deanna said innocently. "What brings you here? Not too noisy are we?"

"No worse than usual, although I'd like to request that whoever keeps playing that wretched Paul McCartney Christmas song stop it at once. It was irritating and banal in the Seventies and it hasn't improved with time."

"Good point." Deanna agreed. "Hey! Luella! Change the record. Put something decent on." Luella obligingly put Abba's Greatest Hits on. As "Dancing Queen" blared out of the speakers, Marlie responded by grabbing Rianne and dragging her on to the dance floor.

"None the worse for her experiences, I see." Snape commented dryly as Rianne and Marlie began miming along to the record.

"You wouldn't know she'd been ill." Deanna grinned.

Snape glanced around the room at the decorations. "Forgive me for asking, Miss Tyler, but isn't it a little late in the year for Christmas decorations? And what on earth is that supposed to be?" He indicated Marlie's new cactus, which now had pride of place in the centre of the buffet.

"That? Fred the Cactus. Present from the Weasley twins. New Slytherin mascot."

Snape was unimpressed. "Well if you think it's going on the official house badge, you are much mistaken. It looks obscene. You still haven't told me why all the Christmas decorations."

"Well, you see, Marlie was so upset about missing Christmas that we decided to recreate it for her. One of my better ideas." Deanna went over to what remained of the birthday cake. "She missed her birthday as well, so we made it a birthday party too. Rianne insisted on saving you a slice of cake." She picked up the last remaining slice and wrapped it in a napkin for him. "There you go. It's very nice. The Lovegoods' house elf made it, it's quite edible."

Snape raised an eyebrow. "Thank Miss Stormosi for me. I can quite see what a sacrifice it must be for seventy young people to leave food lying around."

"Too right, if you hadn't turned up by eleven, I was having it." Deanna grinned. The look on her face turned serious. "By the way, sir, you were absolutely right."

"You surprise me. It is most unusual these days for young people in general and you in particular to admit that their elders are right about anything. About what, pray?"

"Do you remember when you were asking me to explain why I was hanging around with Crabbe and his friends? And I told you I was spying on them, then asked if the not being able to look yourself in the mirror ever went away?"

Snape seemed to soften a little at this. "I remember. Go on."

"I just thought you might like to know it's gone." she said softly.

Deanna couldn't have sworn to this, but the ghost of a smile seemed to flicker around his lips, and his eyes seemed to take on a genuinely pleased expression.

"Good. I'm happy for you." Snape said. And meant it.

"What about yours? Has that gone yet?" Deanna asked curiously. Snape's normal sneer resurfaced.

"I don't believe that's any of your concern, Miss Tyler. However, I will state for the record that it has eased slightly. I have things to be getting on with, so I shall leave you to your little soiree. Be sure to have ended it by midnight, or I shall be back and in a far less sociable mood. You have been warned. Good evening." And with a flourish of his cloak, he was gone. Luella approached Deanna, who was left staring at the wall.

"What was that all about? You know, for someone who claims not to stand him, you were getting awfully cosy with him. Better watch out, Rianne'll be getting jealous." Luella teased.

Deanna grinned. "He just wanted to make sure that we were all in bed by midnight and to not play any more Paul McCartney if we could possibly help it."

"Ah. A John Lennon fan then. Strange, I never had ol' Snape-eyes down as the hippie type."

"Now that I would like to see. Snapey with flowers in his hair." Deanna laughed. "So, Luella. What exactly did Rianne say about Snape that's so embarrassing? You have to tell me. Please?"

Luella grinned evilly. "I'll tell you later. Come on, help me choose the next records. I'm told someone's got YMCA somewhere around here, and I want to find it. Mike reckons Marcus Flint really likes it."

"You're on." Deanna said, grinning. "Flinty dancing to the Village People? This I must see."

Professor Snape left the Serpent's Nest in a better than usual mood. Munching on the cake that Deanna had given him, which proved to be really quite tasty, he found himself heading for the Hogwarts staff room. Tonight, he felt the need for company. I wonder if Caitlin's doing anything, he mused to himself. Then wished he hadn't. Caitlin's look of fury and her oh-so-well-chosen words the last time they'd spoken were still too fresh in his mind for him to really want to remember. And the worst thing of all was that she was absolutely in the right. What he'd done to her was unforgivable. He could hardly blame her for not wanting him anywhere near her. But that didn't make it any less painful.

Think of something else, he told himself furiously. Someone other than dear, sweet, beautiful Caitlin with those heart-wrenchingly gorgeous brown eyes and dark blonde hair that he constantly had to fight the urge to run his hands through. He shook his head in disbelief. No matter how hard he tried, her face seemed to be everywhere. Wouldn't the woman ever leave him alone? In a desperate attempt to banish visions of Caitlin Tyler lying on his desk in a sequinned set of dark blue dress robes, purring at him, he conjured Deanna's image to mind instead. This had the effect of bringing on a whole wave of far less pleasant emotions. Not that he didn't like her, quite the contrary. But every time he saw her, every time he looked into her eyes, he couldn't help being forcibly reminded of himself at the same age. There's another one who's suffered too much too young, he thought to himself. Someone else with those same mistrustful eyes, same bristling anger at anyone getting too close, same stoic bravery masking a frightening vulnerability. Snape recognised the signs all too well, and swore there and then to make sure Deanna was taken care of. He had visions of Deanna and her mother struggling on alone, Deanna having to live with the shame of being fatherless. He didn't know the details of her childhood, but something told him it couldn't have been easy. A pang of regret struck at his heart. He wished with all his might that he'd tried harder to find Caitlin sooner. I could have helped you, he thought. Supported you. You were and still are my best friend, despite everything. Some friend I turned out to be, he thought bitterly. Well, it was probably too late to salvage anything with Caitlin. But maybe it wasn't too late for her daughter. He resolved to do all he could to help her make something of her life, if she'd let him.

He turned the corner into the staff room corridor and came face to face with Professor Quirrell.

"Watch where you are going, Samael." he snarled.

Quirrell trembled. "S-s-s-sorry, S-s-s-Severus." he stammered, trembling like a leaf. Snape regarded him with contempt. Quirrell quickly changed the subject.

"Isn't it g-good n-news ab-about M-miss Love-g-good?" he said, trying to smile. Snape did not return it.

"Good news indeed." Snape said shortly, waiting for Quirrell to elaborate.

"I exp-p-p-pect you're p-pleased to have y-your S-s-Seeker back." Quirrell said, making polite conversation.

"I won't pretend it's not a relief." Snape said. Quirrell made to move on, but was brought up short by Snape's wrist shooting out and grabbing him. Quirrell shivered with fright as Snape's eyes bored into his.

"Be careful, Samael." Snape said quietly. "Don't think I don't know who gave Crabbe, Goyle and Parkinson permission to get the Sleeping Death recipe out of the Restricted Section. Don't think I don't know who advised them on the finer points of brewing it. Or who planted ideas in Crabbe's head about how good he was at Quidditch, how that Seeker place was his by right and to what lengths he was justified in going to get it. Oh, I know," he said softly to the terrified Professor Quirrell, "that they'll never pin anything on you this time. But I am watching you, Samael. And if any of my Slytherins fall victim to Dark Arts again, then I shall make absolutely sure that whoever is behind it gets what's coming to them. Trust me, Samael, I know things that would have you practically begging to be sent to Azkaban rather than undergo them. Do you understand me?"

Quirrell trembled, but met his gaze. "I don't kn-know what you're t-t-talking about, S-s-s-Severus." he whispered.

Snape's expression did not change. "Good. Then there'll be no more trouble, will there?" He released Quirrell, thrusting the younger wizard away from him before walking away without a second glance. Behind him, Quirrell nursed his bruised wrist and watched Snape go, a look of hate on his face.

"Frighten me, would you, Severus?" he whispered. "You'll pay for that. You'll pay."

Slowly but surely, life in the Slytherin common room returned to normal. Marlie and Deanna's special status wore off, and they had to face the reality of going about classes as usual. Marlie in particular found the going tough, as she had extra classes, Quidditch training and a lot of homework to do as well as everything the rest of the year was studying. However, she was glad to report that Snape had exempted her from the end of year exams in the light of her special circumstances.

"So at least I don't have to worry about failing all my classes on top of getting all this work done." Marlie told them, her mood much recovered. "Plus I've been let off Flying classes as I'm already doing Quidditch training, so that's a little extra time. I was already ahead of most of you lot in Transfiguration anyway, so that's not really a problem. Herbology is really dealing with regular Muggle-style herbs at the moment, so it's not like I've missed too much there. Astronomy is practical stuff anyway, so I can just take up where I left off. And as for History of Magic, I very much doubt I need to put much effort in there. In fact, Professor Snape has excused me from doing any catch-up there, so I just need to leap in with you lot and get on with things. I don't think he thinks much of that subject either."

"The way Binns teaches it, I'm not surprised." Luella remarked. "You've really missed nothing. So just Charms, Defence Against the Dark Arts and Potions you need to work at then."

"Exactly, which is where you three come in. Given that you're all rather good at those subjects, you can give me a hand with all the extra work I'll need to do, can't you? Admittedly, Quirrell and Flitwick are big softies, but Snape scares me."

"Wuss." Deanna grinned. "OK, I'll give you a hand with Charms, Lu and Ri can sort you out with Potions and we'll all help out with Defence Against the Dark Arts. Right, that's your work sorted out. Now on to more important things. You are of course aware that at the end of the month, in less than two weeks time, we have the Ravenclaw match that will no doubt decide the tournament." She gave Marlie a piercing stare.

Marlie shifted uneasily. "Yes, I know. You keep reminding me, Flint keeps reminding me, Mike keeps reminding me, everyone keeps reminding me! Look, Madam Pomfrey and Professor Snape both reckon I'm match-fit, and I'm doing OK in training, so leave it."

"It's not your physical fitness we're concerned about." Rianne said firmly.

Marlie looked even more uncomfortable. "So what is it then?"

"Well, are you really confident enough yet? Are you really OK about Quidditch again? Especially after what happened after the last match."

"Rianne, don't fuss." Marlie snapped irritably. "I'm fine. We're going to go out there and we're going to win. Now leave me alone, I have work to do."

However, Marlie was not nearly as confident as she pretended. She wasn't the same as she had been before. And although it had been her flying skills that had saved her in the dream trance, her body had not been on a broom for three months and she knew it. She was woefully out of practice, and three Quidditch sessions a week was not going to remedy the situation in time. And try as she might to pretend that all was well, it clearly wasn't.

On her way back from the final training session before the match, Marlie was close to tears. Flint had bawled her out for missing the practice Snitch even though it had been

almost in front of her. And the rest of the team, even Mike, were giving her looks ranging from pity to intense anxiety. I'm not up to it, Marlie thought. There is no way we're going to beat Ravenclaw with me like this.

She went straight to her dorm, picked up Snowy and lay back, feeling sick with nerves. She held the cat up and looked into its eyes. "What do I do, Snowy? Any ideas?" She thought of flying under the stars with Morticia and how peaceful it had been. Right now, she wanted nothing more than to go back there. Morticia's words came back to her. "This place will always be part of you. In your dreams, and when you need it, this place is open to you always. I am here for you always. If you ever need me, call on me. I will come. My power is at your disposal." Well, if ever she needed Tish, it was now. Reaching inside her robes, she pulled out the Snitch and gazed into its reflective surface. Allowing herself to relax, she whispered Morticia's name over and over again.

Morticia's face materialised in the Snitch. "What is it, sister?" Marlie heard that familiar voice whispering in her ear.

"I need your help, Tish." Marlie whispered. "I've got a Quidditch game against Ravenclaw in two days time and I'm not sure I'm up to it. Help me!"

Morticia smiled. "The Dementors getting you down again, are they? Marlie, they can't really hurt you, you know that? Trust yourself! Your body knows how to be an excellent Seeker, your body remembers how to do it. It is your mind getting in the way. You need to quieten down your mind and shut it up so your body can get on with winning."

"Yes, and? Rianne said much the same earlier! I was hoping you'd know how." Marlie snapped irritably.

"Not I. You will need outside help to fight off the Dementors. Last time it was Deanna who saved you. This time, another of your friends is the one to do it." Morticia said cryptically.

"Which one?" Marlie asked.

"The one who can control the Serpent, of course. The one who would have been able to survive a basilisk attack. You know who I mean."

"Who?" Marlie cried. "Tish, tell me!" But it was too late. Morticia was fading, and next minute, she was gone.

Marlie dropped the Snitch in frustration. So who could help, if not Deanna? Someone who could control a basilisk. No one she knew could do that. Sighing, she got up and went to the common room.

Deanna, Luella and Rianne were busy playing with a Jenga set left over from the party. Marlie walked in to find them engaged in an argument as to whether Levitation Charms were in contravention of the rules or not.

"Look, I keep telling you, there's just as much chance of a Levitated piece dislodging the entire ensemble as one pulled out by hand!" Deanna was claiming.

Rianne was sceptical. "Yes, but you have overlooked the fact that if you are not physically touching the Jenga tower, you eliminate the risk of accidentally pushing it over, don't you?"

"Not if you're bad at Levitation Charms, you don't!" Deanna told her.

"Which just happens to give you a clear advantage, doesn't it?" Rianne said scathingly. "Ah, Marlie, just the person. Give us your honest opinion, is using magic to withdraw a Jenga block legal?"

"Couldn't care less, Ri. Probably not." Marlie sat down wearily. She surveyed her friends despairingly. None of them looked like the type to call off a basilisk. Rianne and Deanna, currently squabbling like children, certainly didn't seem like powerful witches at the moment. And while Luella was without question academically bright, Marlie couldn't think of anyone more normal. Hard to believe she was the Slytherin Redeemer.

Marlie looked up and saw the banner behind Luella's head, it's twin basilisk Slytherin Serpents twisting eerily in the firelight. It came to her suddenly. The Slytherin Serpent. One who had power over it. The Redeemer. It had to be Luella.

She looked at Luella again. She was looking back at her, concerned. Marlie decided to risk it. "Lu." she began. "Can I talk to you alone for a bit?"

Luella smiled lazily. "No problem. I doubt these two will miss me. I'm just going to give Marlie a hand with something. Won't be long, you two. Carry on without me." Deanna and Rianne acknowledged her and returned to arguing, barely aware of Luella and Marlie leaving.

Luella entered their dorm and settled down on her bed with Sooty. "Well now, Marlie." she said pleasantly. "What can I do for you?"

Marlie hesitated before taking the plunge. "Well, it's about the match."

"What about it?" Luella said sharply, the warm, fuzzy attitude gone in an instant.

"I can't do it, Lu." Marlie said, shaking. "I'm out of practice, my reflexes are shot to pieces, I can't concentrate on anything, I keep imagining a crowd of Dementors turning up and making me fall off my broom, and there's just no way I can compete like this! Help me!" Marlie practically begged her.

Luella softened. "I thought there was something up. You've not been yourself lately. Can't hide things from me, you know."

"I know, I know." Marlie sighed. "What do I do, Lu? I can't back out, we'll lose for certain. We don't have a reserve Seeker any more, do we? But I can't play like this. My concentration is shot to hell."

Luella's heart bled for her. Marlie seemed so lost and frightened. Yet what could she do? I can't wave a wand and make it all better, and a Confidence Potion is beyond me. I'm not Snape, after all! she thought.

A little voice spoke quietly at the back of her mind. Oh no? it was saying. Remember Dream Weaver? Deanna didn't think she could do that either. Until you talked her into it.

Luella squirmed at the memory. She'd somehow managed to hypnotise Deanna into being brave enough to go through with it. But could she do it again? Only one way to find out.

"Marlie, there is one thing. But it may not work, I've only ever been able to do it once and it was an accident then."

Marlie leapt at the chance. "Luella, if there is anything you could possibly do to sort me out, I will love you madly for the rest of my life. I don't care what it is, just do it! I'll try anything. Please?"

"OK, I'll give it a go. Sit next to me and look into my eyes. Then just take a few deep breaths and relax." Marlie nodded and did so. Luella took a few deep breaths herself and began.

"Listen, Marlene. You are the best Seeker in the school. You are an amazing flier, you have the fastest reflexes anyone here has ever seen, and you have always managed to catch the Snitch every time you've played. You are going to win on Saturday, and you are going to win handsomely. That Snitch is already yours. You will find it virtually straight away. You will find it and you will win. Do you understand me?" Luella said softly but firmly.

It worked. Marlie said nothing, just gazed at her fixedly. Then she shook herself. "Well, Lu?" she asked anxiously. "You going to do it, then?"

Luella smiled. "Depends. How are you feeling about the match now?"

"Still terrified. I mean, just the mere thought of flying..." She stopped. Luella watched with interest as the mere thought of flying weaved its way through Marlie's mind.

"You know something, I'm not scared at all." Marlie said thoughtfully. "I mean, what was I worried about? I'm the star Seeker, aren't I? Of course I can bloody do it. Sorry I wasted your time, Lu."

"Perfectly alright, Marlie. I mean, if you're frightened, it's best to talk things over. Probably just admitting your fear cured you."

"You're probably right." Marlie said cheerily. "What were you going to do, by the way?"

"Doesn't matter." Luella said quickly.

"Oh. Right." Marlie didn't seem that interested. "Come on then, let's go and see if Deanna and Rianne have stopped arguing."

Saturday morning brought with it some of the worst weather any of them had seen for a long time. The sky was so dark that sunrise made no appreciable difference in the light levels, and the rain was lashing down almost vertically.

Luella viewed the Great Hall roof in shock. "They can't expect you to play in that, surely? How on earth are you going to even see the Snitch in this?"

Rianne laughed. "Ah, come on, it's only a little rain. You don't call off a Quidditch match just because the weather's awful."

Deanna nodded. "Quidditch is a bit like rugby, it goes ahead in all weathers. I remember one year, the All-Britain Quidditch Cup Final took place in very similar conditions. Chudley Cannons versus Haverfordwest Horntails. The Hornies ran away with it, of course. The Cannons completely unused to playing in such weather. Typical soft English bastards."

Marlie looked offended. "Just because it's always bloody raining in Wales. I still maintain that we should have had a penalty for that deliberate and unprovoked foul on our Seeker."

"Deanna, you live in bloody Surrey, why are you supporting a Welsh Quidditch team?" Rianne said curiously.

"My mum's family are from Wales. I was born there. Apparently we've got an ancestral family home out there, but it's in ruins. Maybe one day I'll get it renovated." Deanna mused absently.

Luella raised an eyebrow. This was the first she'd heard about an ancestral family home. She remembered the huge pile of Galleons in the Tylers' Gringotts vault and realised how little she actually knew about Deanna's family. How little she knew about Deanna. This was the first time Deanna had spoken about her Quidditch team or her family. Deanna had obviously been forbidden to talk about things like that before coming to Hogwarts and Luella had never thought to ask before now, assuming that she already knew that sort of thing. How wrong she was.

The weather had not improved as the teams filed onto the pitch. In fact, if anything, it had got worse. Luella, Deanna and Rianne were using the banner to shelter under.

"Do you reckon Marlie'll be OK in this weather?" Deanna asked anxiously. "I mean, she's going to have her work cut out for her. Alright for the Hornies to win when it's like this, but she's only a kid. And an out of practice one at that."

"She will be. She has to be." Rianne said, trying to sound confident. "If we win this, the Cup's ours. If we lose, then we've got to beat Hufflepuff by a pretty big margin to be certain. She'll win. She has to. Right, Lu?"

"Whatever you say, Ri, you know more about Quidditch than I do." Luella said pensively, watching the teams parade out. The announcer had finished announcing the Ravenclaw line-up and was now going through the familiar Slytherin list of "Foxworth! Flint! Lovegood! Montague! Stormosi! Vetinari! Aaaand... Lovegood!"

A huge cheer went up as Marlie was called out, and not just from the Slytherin end. All around the stadium, Gryffindors, Hufflepuffs and Ravenclaws were getting to their feet and giving Marlie a standing ovation. As the three Slytherins watched, Marlie peeked out from under her green Quidditch hat and waved back to them all, smiling proudly.

The match got underway. Ravenclaw won the toss and had possession of the Quaffle first, passing towards the Slytherin end. The Slytherins played as well as they could, but Ravenclaw worked better together, and certainly coped more with the rain. Before long, Slytherin were fifty-ten down. Deanna groaned softly, her head in her hands.

"Come on, Marlie, find the Snitch. Quickly!" Rianne whispered. Luella didn't say a word, hardly daring to speak.

"Don't suppose either of you two know any weather magic?" Deanna asked hopefully. Rianne shook her head. Deanna returned her attention to the game and promptly howled as Ravenclaw scored again and Laetitia Vetinari was almost unseated by a Bludger that Mike had failed to spot, much to Flint's fury.

Luella looked at Marlie. High up on her Cleansweep, Marlie seemed to be struggling against the wind. The Ravenclaw Seeker was male and in the fifth year, and consequently was finding it much easier to control his broom in the howling gale than Marlie, an twelve year old girl, was. Although Marlie's face was not visible, her body language said it all about how lost and hopeless she was feeling. Luella concentrated hard, willing Marlie to find her strength.

Marlie seemed to reach inside her robes at that point and pulled out a small shining object that Luella guessed must be her Snitch necklace. She seemed to look deep into it for a moment before squeezing it and tucking it away again. Her confidence seemingly renewed, she began looking rather more purposeful.

Scanning the arena carefully, Marlie was on the look out for anything that might be the Snitch. It wasn't easy making anything out in this rain, and both she and the Ravenclaw Seeker had gone after false alarms before now. Claspig her own Snitch under her robes, she felt it's reassuring warmth. Concentrating hard, she willed the

other Snitch to appear. "Snitch to Snitch, brother to brother, call your twin, one to the other!" she whispered, inventing a spell on the spot. She felt the Snitch flap its wings, and looked around hopefully.

Suddenly she saw it. A flash of silver over near where the Gryffindors had assembled. Marlie, seeing the Ravenclaw Seeker looking in the other direction, nonchalantly began to fly towards it. The Snitch wasn't moving, just hovering in mid-air. Marlie began to speed up slightly. The Ravenclaw captain suddenly noticed her and shouted at the other Seeker, who was now looking towards her. Marlie abandoned all attempt at subterfuge and, flattening herself against her broom, kicked it into gear and flew at the Snitch for all she was worth.

The other Seeker gave chase, and the match was on. Marlie did have a head start and a faster broom, but on the other hand, the Ravenclaw Seeker was bigger and heavier, and flew far better in the wind. And it was not long before he was gaining on her. Marlie gritted her teeth and pushed her broom with all her strength, willing it to go faster. The crowd were on their feet, screaming. Out of the corner of her eye, she glimpsed a flash of blue. He was almost alongside her now. She focused on the Snitch. Close, so close.

The Ravenclaw overtook her and reached out his hand. The Snitch would be his if she didn't do something. "No, you can't win now!" she whispered.

Suddenly, the other Seeker veered sharply to the right. A Bludger had whizzed out of nowhere, hit by Mike in an attempt to distract the Ravenclaw Seeker. It worked. As the Ravenclaw swerved to avoid it, he was caught by a gust of wind and blown off course. It was now or never. "Thanks, Mikey!" Marlie whispered with relief as she forced her broom forward. The Ravenclaw Seeker, struggling to reach her against the wind, could only watch in frustration as Marlie swooped forward and caught the Snitch deftly in the palm of her hand.

Down below, the watching Slytherins went mad. Rianne, Deanna and Luella clutched each other in a group hug. "We did it! We did it!" Deanna was shouting. "We won!"

Next to them, Lucas Vetinari and Alex Lynch were frantically trying to work out what that meant for the championship scores. "According to my calculations, the only way anyone else can win it now is if we lose to Hufflepuff by more than 200 points and Gryffindor beat Ravenclaw by 300 points which is not going to happen because the Ravens are too good, and the only way we're going to lose to Hufflepuff is if half the team drop dead and we have to play our reserves. It's as good as ours, my friends!" Lucas was yelling. The three girls held each other all the harder.

Back on the pitch, the players were coming in to land. Marlie was being hugged and screamed at by the other Slytherins, delirious with joy.

"You did it, you did it!" Kat was screaming. "We've won!"

"Don't thank me, thank Mikey!" Marlie laughed. "If he hadn't sent that Bludger over, I'd never have made it!" Kat immediately hugged Mike and kissed him on the cheek, leaving him flushed and with a slightly doopy grin on his face.

The Slytherin spectators had by this time left their seats and invaded the pitch en masse. Deanna, Luella and Rianne were the first to reach Marlie.

Deanna immediately flung her arms round her, weeping with joy. "You did it! Well done, mate!" she enthused joyously.

"Yeah, well done! We had every confidence in you!" Rianne shouted.

"Couldn't have done it without you three!" Marlie grinned, hugging them back. "You saved me from Sleeping Death, you got the ones who did it expelled, and you gave me back my belief in myself. How can I ever thank you enough?"

Deanna airily waved her hand. "Think nothing of it. We're your mates, that's what we're for!"

"Let's face it, we four make a great team, don't we?" Rianne grinned.

"Absolutely!" Deanna agreed. "Put it there, folks." She held out her hand. All four of them clasped their hands together. Deanna spoke again. "Together we can do anything. Together we can take on the world. Together we can beat even Voldemort, and most definitely Gryffindor. Can't we?"

"Yeah!" the other three yelled.

"So let's always work together. Let's not fight amongst ourselves, let's always help each other out, let's swear eternal friendship on the Great Serpent!" Deanna was getting carried away, apparently forgetting that her last encounter with a Slytherin Serpent had nearly proved fatal.

"Friends." Rianne agreed.

"For life." Luella promised.

"On the Great Serpent." Marlie grinned. The four of them shook hands and let each other go. As Marlie was immediately mobbed by hysterical Slytherins, Luella stood back in a daze. It had been an amazing six months since she received her Hogwarts letter. She couldn't believe that so much had happened since then. Back in the summer, she'd been the class outcast, nondescript, quite bright but otherwise nothing special. Now here she was, a witch, Slytherin Redeemer, apparently possessed of the ability to hypnotise people, top of most of her subjects, or at least in the top five (apart from Flying), and a member of the Slytherin in-crowd. She looked at her three friends. I've got a proper social life, she thought. Not just me and Deanna anymore. She hugged herself with joy at the thought. Of all the things to have changed, she valued this one most of all. She suddenly began to feel more confident about her eventual destiny. With these three beside her, she could accomplish anything. Even beating Voldemort. And with that, she put these thoughts behind her and followed the rest of her house to what promised to be their best celebration yet.

FINIS

Until Part Two...